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Kiss of Death

BY C.J. CARTER-STEPHENSON

ILLUSTRATION BY EMMANUEL PAIGE

A ghost story

Sunday 7th December 2008

VERITY FROZE, BUT DID NOT BACK AWAY. JOHNNY HELD HIS BREATH. THE GHOST'S HAND WAS JUST MILLIMETRES FROM HIS THROAT, AND SOMETHING TOLD HIM THAT ONCE HE WAS IN ITS GRIP, HE WAS AS GOOD AS DEAD.

A PIERCING SCREAM ECHOED AROUND the bedroom, shattering the serenity of the morning. Nicola Morris jerked her head around to look at her husband, who was lying on the bed watching television. "I wish you'd turn off that damn TV, Johnny" she said irritably. "It's time we got going." She selected a pair of tights from the dresser drawer and began pulling them on.

Johnny didn't move. "But I'm enjoying this," he protested.

"And what precisely is it you're watching?" she asked. "Some stupid horror film by the sound of it."

"Got it in one," replied Johnny, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen.

"I'll never understand what you like about those things," said Nicola. "They're so formulaic."

Johnny didn't answer. Nicola stared at him for a moment, and then abruptly turned off the television. "Enough time wasting," she said crossly. "You agreed to take me to Lamont Hall and you're not getting out of it. There's a guided tour in half an hour and I want to be on it."

"Fine. I still think it's a stupid idea, though," said Johnny. "Lamont Hall is a tourist attraction and we're not tourists."

Nicola gave a long suffering sigh. "No, we're not tourists, she agreed. "We've lived around the corner from the place for I don't know how many years and we still know next to nothing about it."

It's time we did some discovering, so move it, scum bag." She pushed her husband gently, but firmly towards the edge of the bed.

"Okay, I'm going," said Johnny, rising reluctantly to his feet, "and watch who you're calling scumbag, fish-breath."

They looked at each other across the room for a moment, before bursting into laughter. Then, Johnny kissed Nicola on the cheek and began picking out an outfit.

As soon as they were dressed, Nicola and Johnny drove to Lamont Hall, paid their admission fee and made their way to the tour assembly point. They were just in time to hear the elderly guide introduce herself as Dorothy. She smiled at them as they joined the group and led the way to the first room.



For Nicola, the highlight of the tour was a small chapel in the grounds of the house, which dated back to the reign of William the Conqueror. She gazed up at the carved animals around the entrance as Dorothy led them inside.

"Is everybody in?" Dorothy asked as the last few stragglers filed through the door. "Good. Welcome to the Lamont family chapel . . ."

Johnny switched off. He didn't share his wife's love of history and was wishing he was back at home watching football. Noticing he wasn't paying attention, Nicola gave him a sharp elbow in the ribs. He looked up in surprise. Dorothy was saying something about polychromatic pictures. "Poly-what?" he asked, having no idea what she was talking about.

"Polychromatic," said Nicola irritably. "It means being composed of many colours."

"Smart-ass," said Johnny, kicking idly at the limestone wall as Dorothy began speculating about how many children had been baptised in the thousand-year-old font.

"Talking of children," Johnny whispered to Nicola, "it's great to be free of our own little tyke for a while. Perhaps we can persuade her to spend a few more weekends staying with friends."

"You don't mean that," Nicola whispered back. "You hate it when she's not around. You're like

two peas in a pod."

The pair fell silent as Dorothy led the way to a beautifully carved stone bust on a tall pedestal. "Now everyone, you'll be pleased to hear it's ghost story time," she said melodramatically.

Johnny's ears perked up. He didn't believe in ghosts, but anything was better than more boring historical facts.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Verity Lamont," said Dorothy, gesturing at the bust, "born in the winter of 1876 to Sir Edmond Lamont and his wife, Clara. Verity was well liked by all who knew her, and in the fullness of time became engaged to the local doctor, Paul Russell. Although it wasn't the most advantageous match, her parents went along with it, because she was the youngest of their daughters. It was clear from the start the betrothed couple were very much in love, but their happiness was to be short-lived."

"Glad to hear it," said Johnny callously. "This sugar coated romance stuff makes me nauseous."

"Quiet, Johnny," said Nicola, giving him another elbow in the ribs.

"The week before their wedding, which was due to take place on Midsummer's Day, Paul was thrown from his horse while rushing to the aid of a critically ill child during a storm; he was killed instantly," said Dorothy. "Verity was devastated and locked herself in her bedchamber. Her family spent two days trying to coax her into coming out, but to no avail. On the third day, they invited one of her childhood friends to stay at the house in the hope he would be able to assist. Shortly after midnight, as he was passing her room on his way to bed, this friend heard Verity sobbing, and persuaded her to open her door to him. What he saw disturbed him greatly. Dressed in her wedding dress and veil, she was a shadow of her former self. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were haggard. He tried to talk to her, but she was in some kind of trance. In the circumstances, he should probably have called her family for help, but I'm sorry to say he had *other* things on his mind."

"Sleazebag type things?" asked Nicola.

"Exactly," Dorothy confirmed. "He had harboured secret desires for Verity for years and saw this as his chance to satisfy them, so he started kissing her. Verity pushed him roughly away. 'You

fool,' she screeched. 'These lips are death! My fiancé kissed them; my fiancé died. You have kissed them; you will die.' The young man was so unsettled he fled the room. By the time he pulled himself together enough to go back, Verity had tied a rope to the handle of one of the windows and hanged herself against the wall of the house.

"Her family were obviously very upset by her death and commissioned this wonderful bust as a memorial." Dorothy laid her hand on top of the bust and gazed around at her captivated audience. "By rights the story should have ended there," she went on, "but it didn't. Soon afterwards, Verity's ghost paid a visit to the lecherous friend, kissed him with its clammy lips and sucked the life right out of him. Legend has it that even now she is unable to rest in peace, and will return to haunt anybody foolhardy enough to kiss the bust during the midnight hour of the anniversary of her passing."

"I'm sensing you're going to tell us someone's done it," said Johnny.

"Indeed I am," Dorothy replied. "The very next year, the Lamont family marked the anniversary of Verity's death with a midnight service in the chapel. Verity's uncle, who was more than a little eccentric, kissed the bust on the lips to demonstrate his heartfelt affection. Three days later, he was dead. The official verdict was that he died of natural causes, but the local population believed otherwise."

"Sounds like a lot of superstitious claptrap to me," Johnny remarked.

"Claptrap or not, it's still an interesting story," said Nicola.



Nicola and Johnny thought no more about Verity's story until a few weeks later. Their car had broken down on the way home from a local pub and they were taking a shortcut home through the grounds of Lamont Hall. There was no moon and the landscape was swathed in inky darkness.

"Quite a night, wasn't it," said Johnny as they stumbled along the path, feeling more than a little worse for wear from the alcohol they'd consumed.

Nicola shrugged. "The company was good," she said, "but the pub was a little crowded for my taste." Her foot slipped on a rock as she spoke and she clutched at Johnny's arm to steady herself. "I wish we'd stuck to the road!" she exclaimed irritably. "If anyone catches us, we'll be on very shaky ground. There are laws against trespassing, you know."

"Would you get over it," said Johnny. "Nobody's going to catch us. All that is going to happen is we're going to get home twenty minutes earlier than we would have done otherwise."

"Twenty minutes earlier—is that all? It hardly seems worth it," Nicola grumbled.

"Oh, stop complaining and . . ." said Johnny, breaking off abruptly as the Lamont family chapel loomed out of the darkness.

"What's wrong?" asked Nicola.

Johnny pointed towards the chapel. "Look over there," he said softly. "It's the chapel."

"So it is," Nicola replied. "I'll admit geography isn't my strongest point, but doesn't that mean we've been going in completely the wrong direction?"

Johnny nodded sheepishly. "What can I say but sorry," he said.

"Forget it," Nicola replied. "Let's just concentrate on getting home . . ." She paused, noticing that the chapel door was ajar and then said softly, "That's odd—the door's open. Do you think there's somebody in there?"

"At ten to twelve at night?" said Johnny incredulously.

"It could be burglars," Nicola suggested. "Perhaps we should call the police."

"Let's not jump the gun," replied Johnny. "If we call the police, we could end up being arrested ourselves. Let's find out what we're dealing with first." He grabbed hold of Nicola's hand and pulled her towards the chapel. Nicola didn't relish the thought of going anywhere near the shadowy building, but allowed herself to be led inside.

The interior was very dark. Nicola looked nervously around, seeing hidden dangers in every nook and cranny. Johnny meanwhile, was striding down the aisle as if he owned the place. "Hello? Anyone here?" he shouted, peering along the rows.

Nicola could have strangled him. The last thing they should be doing was drawing attention to themselves. Johnny noticed her glaring at him. “There’s nobody here, Nicola,” he said firmly. “Somebody just forgot to lock up.” He paused and a wicked gleam came into his eye. “Unless . . .” he added, allowing his voice to trail off.

“Unless what?” asked Nicola, feeling her heart start to beat a little faster.

“You remember story we heard on the guided tour about Verity Lamont?” asked Johnny.

Nicola nodded.

“Well, her ghost is supposed to have returned from the dead on the anniversary of her death a few days before Midsummer,” Johnny went on.

“And?” said Nicola curiously.

“It’s the twentieth of June today—a few days before Midsummer,” Johnny pointed out. “It’s the right time of night as well. I’m not saying it was the ghost who left the door open, but it’s a strange coincidence.”

Nicola could tell by Johnny’s face he was just winding her up, but the mere mention of Verity’s ghost was enough to make her uneasy. Not wanting him to have the satisfaction of seeing this, she turned away and pretended to study one of the paintings on the wall.

“Oooh Nicola,” said Johnny suddenly. Nicola turned to look at him. He was bending over the bust of Verity Lamont as if he was intending to kiss it.

“Johnny!” said Nicola in an exasperated voice. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” replied Johnny. “Getting fresh with the big bad ghost.” With these words, he began kissing the stone lips of the bust in a grotesque parody of passion. As he did so, the bells of the chapel clock tolled midnight.

Although Nicola was used to Johnny’s shenanigans, she couldn’t help raising an eyebrow at his ridiculous display. She was about to say something cutting, when she noticed a slender figure watching them from behind a statue. The figure took a step forward into a beam of moonlight.

Nicola let out a loud gasp. It was Verity Lamont. She recognised her from her bust. The ghostly woman was dressed in a Victorian wedding dress

and veil, both of which were covered in dust and cobwebs.

Johnny had not yet seen the ghost and was continuing to kiss the bust with ever increasing enthusiasm. It was too much for Nicola. Before she knew what she was doing, she had let out a piercing scream.

Johnny looked up in surprise. “Okay Nicola, I’ve stopped,” he said grumpily. “There’s no need to start screaming.”

Nicola raised a trembling hand to point at Verity, but by the time Johnny turned to look, the ghost had vanished. “I saw her,” Nicola said hysterically.

“Who?” asked Johnny.

“Verity Lamont,” said Nicola.

Johnny sighed impatiently. “It was just your imagination,” he assured her.

“No it wasn’t . . .” Nicola began. She stopped herself as she looked at Johnny’s face. It was clear she wasn’t going to be able to convince him, and she had no desire to stand around in the chapel arguing about it. “Forget I said anything,” she said at length. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” agreed Johnny.

Nicola was so unsettled by what had happened in the chapel that she ran all the way back to the road, and from there, all the way home, with a bewildered Johnny doing his best to match her pace. By the time they reached their front door, they were panting for breath. Nicola hurriedly pulled out her keys and they went inside. They were met in the hallway by their babysitter Samantha.

“Hi guys,” said Samantha cheerfully. “How was your evening?”

Johnny opened his mouth to tell her about the incident in the chapel, but a look from Nicola silenced him and he said instead, “It was great. I’ll fill you in on the details some other time. How was the babysitting? I hope Charlotte didn’t give you too much trouble.”

“None at all,” replied Samantha. “Compared to some of the kids I sit for, Charlotte’s an angel.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Johnny. “Do you want me to give you a lift home?”

Samantha shook her head. “Don’t be silly,” she said. “I only live around the corner.”

“That doesn’t mean something couldn’t happen to you,” said Johnny.

“I’ll be fine,” Samantha assured him. “I’m not the kind of dumb-ass girl who strays from the path or talks to strangers.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” said Johnny with a wide grin. “Pardon me for being concerned.”

Samantha smiled. “I’m going to shoot off now,” she announced, retrieving her coat from the coat stand. “Give me a buzz when you need me again. Catch you later.” She waved goodbye to Nicola and Johnny, and left.

Johnny turned to Nicola. “How come you didn’t want me to tell her about the ghost?” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” said Nicola. “She has to walk past Lamont Hall on her way home. We don’t want to freak her out.”



Worn out from their escapades, Johnny and Nicola slept soundly that night, but the following night, Johnny’s sleep was fitful. As he lay in bed drifting in and out of consciousness, an indistinct shape appeared in the corner of the room. It started off as a deeper patch of shadow in the surrounding darkness, but quickly solidified into a ghostly figure—a figure in a tattered wedding dress.

The figure stood watching Johnny as he tossed and turned. Then, during a temporary lull, it came towards him. Had Johnny woken up, he would have seen its face and recognised it as the ghost of Verity Lamont, but he didn’t. He slept on. Yet, some small part of him seemed to be dimly aware of what was happening, because he muttered softly to himself, “No such thing as ghosts.”

As if in answer to his words, the room was suddenly filled with a whispered chant of, “These lips are death.”

The ghost glided towards the bed. She stood over Johnny like death personified, before crawling across his body and bringing her lips level with his as if she was about to kiss him.

The seconds turned into minutes and still Johnny did not wake up. “No such thing as ghosts,” he said again, this time with a little more force.

Verity let out a wild cackle. Finally, Johnny awoke. He sat bolt upright on the bed, feeling sure there was an intruder in the room, but the ghost had already disappeared. Telling himself he must have been dreaming, he put the incident out of his mind and went back to sleep.



Johnny came home from work the next evening to find Nicola and Charlotte deeply engrossed in some dull historical documentary. He had no desire to watch it with them, so having made himself a sandwich for dinner, he took himself upstairs to immerse himself in a horror movie instead. By the time this movie finished, over three hours later, he was asking himself why he’d bothered, as it was one of the most predictable and unimaginative pieces he’d ever seen. “That’s the end? Well blow me, I didn’t see that coming,” he said sarcastically as the credits began to roll. He flicked off the TV and strode across to the door. “I’m going to hit the sack!” he shouted. “Shouldn’t you two be doing the same?”

“Charlotte put herself to bed hours ago,” Nicola shouted back. “As for me, I’ve got a few things to do, but I won’t be long.”

“All right,” called Johnny. “Well, try not to wake me up when you come in.”

“I’ll try,” replied Nicola.

Johnny turned off the light and climbed into bed. No sooner had he closed his eyes, than he sensed a presence in the room. He tried to tell himself he was imagining it, but the feeling wouldn’t go away. Then he heard a voice. “These lips are death,” it said softly. The voice was feminine, but had a rasping quality to it, like fingernails on a blackboard.

Johnny’s eyes snapped open. His breathing sounded unnaturally loud in his ears. Pushing himself up into a sitting position, he glanced around the room, willing his eyes to adjust to the blackness.

Presently, the shadows in the darkest corner moulded themselves into something else. Johnny didn’t need to see the details to know it was Verity Lamont. He gulped as the ghost came towards him. “So . . . it’s t-true,” he stammered. “Th-there

really is a ghost. What do you want from me?"

Verity didn't answer. Johnny shuffled backwards on the bed, trembling uncontrollably. The ghost was standing directly in front of him now, her eyes blazing with preternatural life through the thin gauze of her veil. Slowly, she reached for Johnny's throat.

Johnny stared at her bony arm in horror. He had never screamed before, but he did now, and once he started, he couldn't stop.

There was a loud bang as the bedroom door burst open and Nicola came running in. "What is it, Johnny?" she asked urgently. "I thought . . ." Her voice trailed off as she noticed Verity.

Johnny would have expected his wife to run away in a blind panic when she saw the ghost, but to his amazement, she didn't. "Get away from my husband," she shouted.

Verity froze, but did not back away. Johnny held his breath. The ghost's hand was just millimetres from his throat, and something told him that once he was in its grip, he was as good as dead. There was a pause, which seemed interminable, then Nicola's expression changed from angry to desperate. Reaching out her hand in a plea for mercy, she walked hesitantly forward. "Please don't hurt him," she said quietly. "I love him. You were in love once. Try to remember what it was like. Then, think how it felt to have your happiness taken from you. Do you really want to be the one that takes it from someone else?"

Verity's hand edged closer to Johnny's throat. "Verity . . ." Nicola began.

"You're wasting your breath," Johnny interrupted, finally finding his voice. "Forget about me and get out of here."

"I'm not leaving you, Johnny!" Nicola said firmly.

Abruptly, Verity lowered her outstretched arm and moved away from the bed. It was as if something in Nicola's words had made her change her mind about whatever she had been about to do.

Nicola and Johnny watched as the ghost drew back into the shadows, her body was growing more and more transparent by the second, until at last, she was no longer there. Then, Johnny let out a huge sigh of relief and began laughing hysterically. "I don't believe it," he said when he had

gotten a hold of himself.

"Me neither," Nicola admitted. "Who would have thought a ghost would remember what it was like to be in love?"

Johnny gave her a strange look, which she wasn't quite sure how to interpret. "Do you think that's why she left?" he asked.

"Don't you?" came her response.

Johnny thought about this, before saying briskly, "I don't know, and at the end of the day, who cares? The important thing is she's gone. The supernatural came a-calling and we kicked its . . ."

The sentence died in his throat as a blood-curdling scream erupted from the room next door. Nicola and Johnny looked at each other in horror. "Charlotte!" they shouted in unison.



Nicola and Johnny found their daughter lying unconscious on her bed. She was immediately rushed to hospital, where she underwent various tests.

It soon became apparent that she was suffering from a previously undiagnosed brain aneurysm. This aneurysm was so extensive the doctors were unable to do anything for her and she died shortly afterwards.

There was nothing in what was found to suggest there was anything unearthly about her death, but Nicola and Johnny were convinced Verity Lamont was responsible. This conviction grew even stronger when they stripped off the girl's bed the following day and found some fragments of white lace, which looked exactly like the material in the ghost's wedding dress.



Poppy Fielding and Marion Rackham sat in the timeless tranquillity of the village graveyard soaking up the ambience. Visiting obscure graveyards was one of their favourite pastimes and they could have happily stayed in this one all day. Both aged seventeen, they wore heavy makeup and were dressed from head to foot in black. Poppy was sketching a picture of an ornate gravestone, while Marion flicked idly through a local newspaper.

“Didn’t I tell you this place was worth visiting?” said Poppy, looking up from her drawing.

“Only about a hundred times,” laughed Marion.

Poppy closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. “The air’s heavy with the spirits of the people buried here,” she said.

The remark put Marion in mind of an article she had read in her newspaper. “Talking of spirits, check out this article,” she said, handing Poppy the paper and pointing to the article in question. It was about a child in the village, who had supposedly died at the hands of a malevolent ghost.

“Fascinating,” said Poppy when she had finished reading.

“It’s a load of rubbish, of course,” said Marion, who didn’t share her friend’s belief in the supernatural.

“You say that about so many things,” Poppy responded, “but can you really be sure?”

“Yes Poppy, I can be,” said Marion firmly.

Poppy turned away from her and gazed across the graveyard. “Then you won’t mind proving it,” she said at last.

“What? How?” asked Marion curiously.

“It says here the ghost’s return is triggered by kissing her bust in the Lamont family chapel during the midnight hour of the anniversary of her death on the twentieth of June . . .” Poppy began.

“Naturally,” Marion cut in, “I’d be honked off if some idiot starting kissing my bust.”

Poppy grinned. “Joking aside,” she said, “all you have to do to prove the legend isn’t true is kiss the bust at the relevant time next year and not fall victim to some terrible disaster.”

Marion considered this for a moment. “You think I’m afraid, don’t you?” she asked, telling herself sternly this wasn’t true. “Well wrong, sister. You’ve got yourself a deal. Come Midsummer’s Day, I’ll be in that chapel kissing Verity’s Lamont’s bust like it was Jim ‘gorgeous eyes’ Morrison, and that’s a promise.”



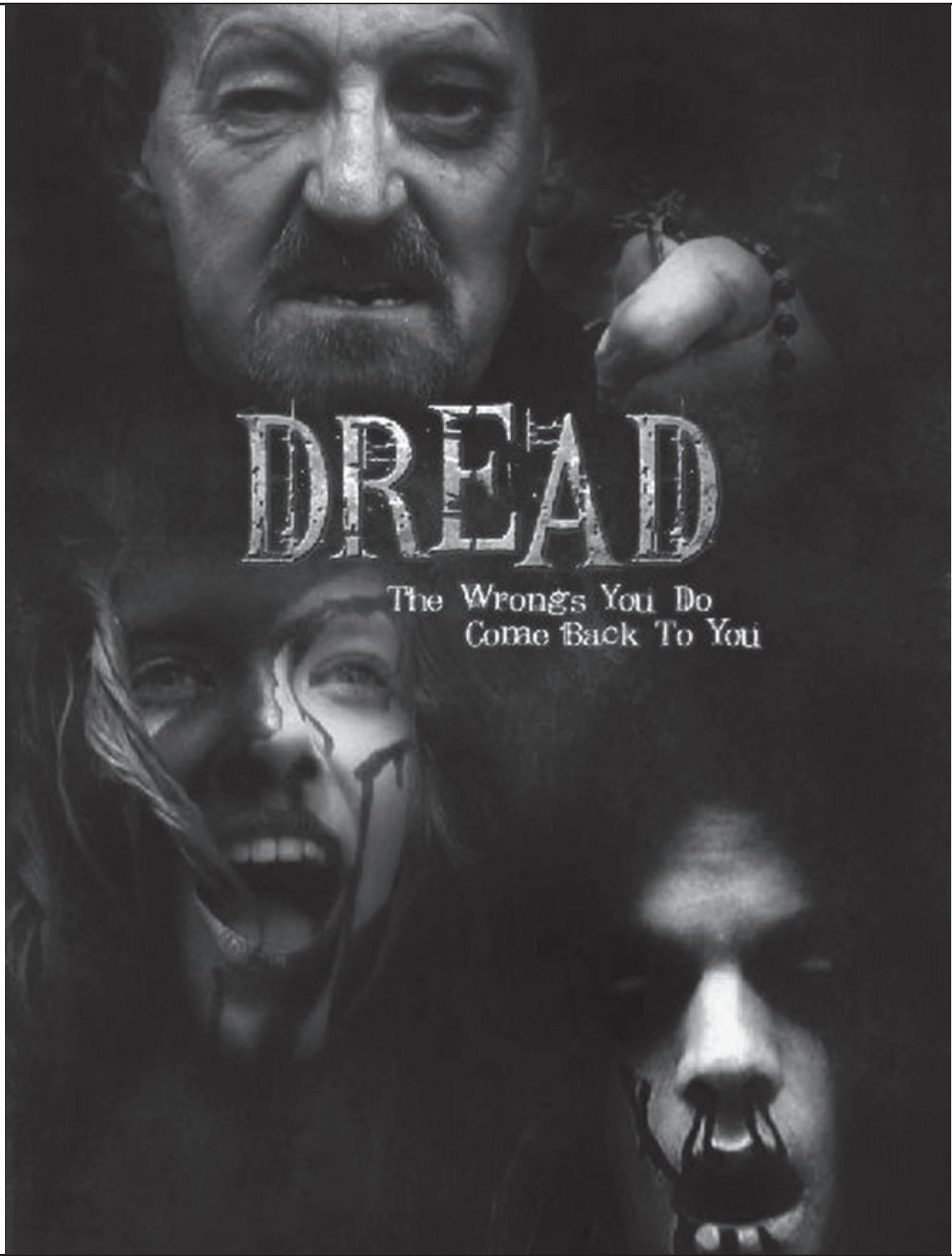
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DREAD

The Wrongs You Do
Come Back To You

Indy Movie Review:

DREAD

WRITTEN BY LAURA SELI

DIRECTED BY WILLIAM SCHOTTEN

REVIEW BY EMMANUEL PAIGE

PHOTOS AND IMAGES PROVIDED BY LAURA SELI

*THIS IS A RIPPING
GOOD ACTION
HORROR STORY WITH
EVERYTHING THAT
A HORROR MOVIE
BUFF WILL WANT.
. . . IT IS A HORROR
MOVIE, AND NOTHING
MORE, AND IT DOES
WHAT IT IS SUPPOSED
TO DO: FRIGHTEN,
GROSS OUT, TERRIFY,
AND FILL YOU WITH
DREAD.*

OVERVIEW:

The movie begins with an artistically rendered series of black and white shots of a scene where an unknown person is burying items near stone statues and performing some sort of ritual.

A quick, hard break to a party with a live band, heavy music, a mosh pit, and a group of guys that are crazy about playing Euchre. We meet the lead character, Russ, who is a beer drinking, cigarette smoking, rude and crude dude with a bad attitude. He is a bully and abusive toward women or anyone weaker than himself. He has a faithful sidekick named Murphy: a bandana wearing lanky red headed guy that is an

accomplice in crime.

There is a fortune teller, complete with pentagram and candles, present at the party who tells Russ that she's heard of him, that he's a womanizer and an "asshole" and that his lifeline is fading and that he better make a change or he is heading for some serious trouble, that "what you do comes back to you." She tells him he better watch his back. Russ thinks it's a bunch of bullshit and doesn't really worry too much about it.

A nun and a priest (Bill Hinzman – *Night of the Living Dead* 1968) are attacked by two demons that appear out of the night in a foggy haze, Dread X and Dread Y. This is where we get our first good look at the primary



villainous force in the movie. The make-up is a bit wonky, and could have been executed with a little more pizzazz (green and black face paint and dark Goth clothing are the complete costumes), but after the plot develops and the story unravels the make-up eventually makes sense. The nun and the priest



see that there is going to be trouble and they set out to do battle with the demons.

This is where we get to see some good gross out gore. One of the demons, the female, Dread Y, is eating a dead animal and rubbing the carcass across her face. We see some awesome guts and gore when she kills a guy at the party who is taking out the trash. The next day another guy is cleaning up the trash in the alley and he sees there is blood and gore everywhere and attempts to clean it up. There is a severed finger lying on the asphalt which he unknowingly steps on.

Russ and Murphy drive home drunk and Russ ends up passing out in the yard, his feet still in the blue Mustang. When he wakes up he wants beer, but they can't get the car started, so Murphy goes in to get the jumper cables and discovers something sinister in the house. There is a demon

living in the house and it has taken over their cache of stolen goods, hampering their illegal money making activities. They can hear it behind the door and see the red glowing light and smoke emanating beneath the door, signaling that something bad is in there. Needless to say, they don't care to open it and find out what is in there.

The rest of the movie is a series of different scenes where we get to see clearer and clearer pictures of the Dread twins, and the particularly nasty way they like to shred their victims into clouds of flying body parts and pieces, showering blood and guts everywhere. The development of Russ and his sidekick, Murphy, as they prove just how despicable they really are, and that they are truly assholes. Russ figures out that someone has put a hex or curse on him and writes down all the names of women that he has known, or thinks, would try to cast a spell on him. His buddies set out to find the woman that put the spell on him. We get to see just how much these women really detest Russ, and they all say how much of an asshole the guy is.

There are some particularly nasty murder scenes with lots of gore. A few unexplained incidents where the cops would surely have been called and some questions would have been asked, and Russ and Murphy would certainly have had to answer them. These minor flaws can easily be overlooked without much concern.

There is a nice battle scene between Russ and his buddies



against the Dread twins where they shoot at them with golf tees as blow darts, flaming tennis balls, and exploding two liter pop bottle bombs.

The whacky neighbor, who Russ has stolen many items from, sits back and watches the festivities while having a cold beer. Eventually, he even gets into the battle with an M16 machine gun and grenade launcher . . . but the Dread twins are indestructible. It will take something more than physical force to stop them.

The nun and the priest, gather up some holy water and go out to do battle with the Dread twins, and eventually they dispose of them, leaving only smoking clothing as they douse them with Holy water and prayers.

In the end, Russ meets the ultimate fate, where he is his own worst enemy.

We find out that the hex

was put on him by a very close and personal someone, but I don't want to spoil the movie completely.

In the end, the moral is: be nice because what you do comes back to you.

REVIEW:

Dread, a film from SCHOTTEN FILMWORKS in association with "In Lieu Of Flowers" . . . Productions. Directed by William Victor Schotten. Written by Laura Seli. Staring: Rick Reed as "Russ", Jason Chatlett as "Murphy", Bill Hinzman as "Priest", Ashley Rozzi, Darrin Willgues as "Dread X", Karen Fox as "Dread Y", and many other supporting actors. House Band (cameo): Kitchen Knife Conspiracy. Music Score: Mark Cantanzriti

Pros: This movie impressed me with its audio and film footage quality. It appeared to

be filmed with good equipment and the scenes and angles were done in a professional manner. The music drives the scenes, and the acting is not completely intolerable.

Cons: This movie lacked continuity, a sense that things were getting somewhere, rough scene transitions, some wonky special effects, and a few minor inconsistencies in plot and story line.

Dread is a low budget independent horror film, and as such, should not be judged too harshly for its rough appearance. Horror films of this type are expected to have a somewhat unfinished characteristic, and their cheesiness is part of their charm. Low budget horror films have been around for a long time, and many of them become cult classics and eventually spawn multiple sequels.

Dread was viewable in one sitting, although a little slow





in areas, and it was not so excruciating or nauseating that I had to turn it off. I've seen some low budget horror movies that were so intolerable and just impossible to watch that I couldn't bare to finish them, but this is not the case with *Dread*. That is more than can be said for a some of the big budget blockbuster tripe coming out of Hollywood these days.

In the end, I must say that I didn't feel like I wasted the nearly two hours it took to watch *Dread*. You could spend your time doing far worse things. The characters were familiar, like next-door neighbors, and the setting was Midwestern America. The creatures were engaging and wicked, the blood and gore was kept to a reasonable limit, and the overall effect was horrifically satisfying. This movie will cure

your horror craving.

This is a ripping good action horror story with everything that a horror movie buff will want. Since it is a low budget flick, don't expect too much pyrotechnics or high-end CGI, but that is to be expected, and this movie will not let you down. It is a horror movie, and nothing more, and it does what it is supposed to do: frighten, gross out, terrify, and fill you with dread.

Laura Seli and William Schotten have struck a vein with their collaborative efforts in the movies they are making together. They seem to have a good feel for the true nature of the horror movie genre and what they are about and what they should achieve. Horror movies are not supposed to be cute or nice, and they should never apologize for being horrible. I think that



in the future we will see some award winning material come from these independent film makers, and I will be waiting anxiously to watch the finished product.



Five

BY ALMA BUHOLZER



Goodbye,

You will be cold again, she said.
Fake forgotten, because I tore you with my mind –
So smart, yellow paper, you were.

I stood for the frozen tree at midnight.
Black leaves buried under two feet of clear water.
I drowned fixed in place,
Mirror to white rotted face.

Her heart beat fast under the decay smell of furs.
Skin was leather, the red lips silently apart.
Eyes were blank, fixed inward.

God, I was warm in that fur.
Of course I thought of you, dear –
As the leaf trapped in ice, and I thought of me as dead until morning –
And I thought of you, how the heat would ease you into decay.

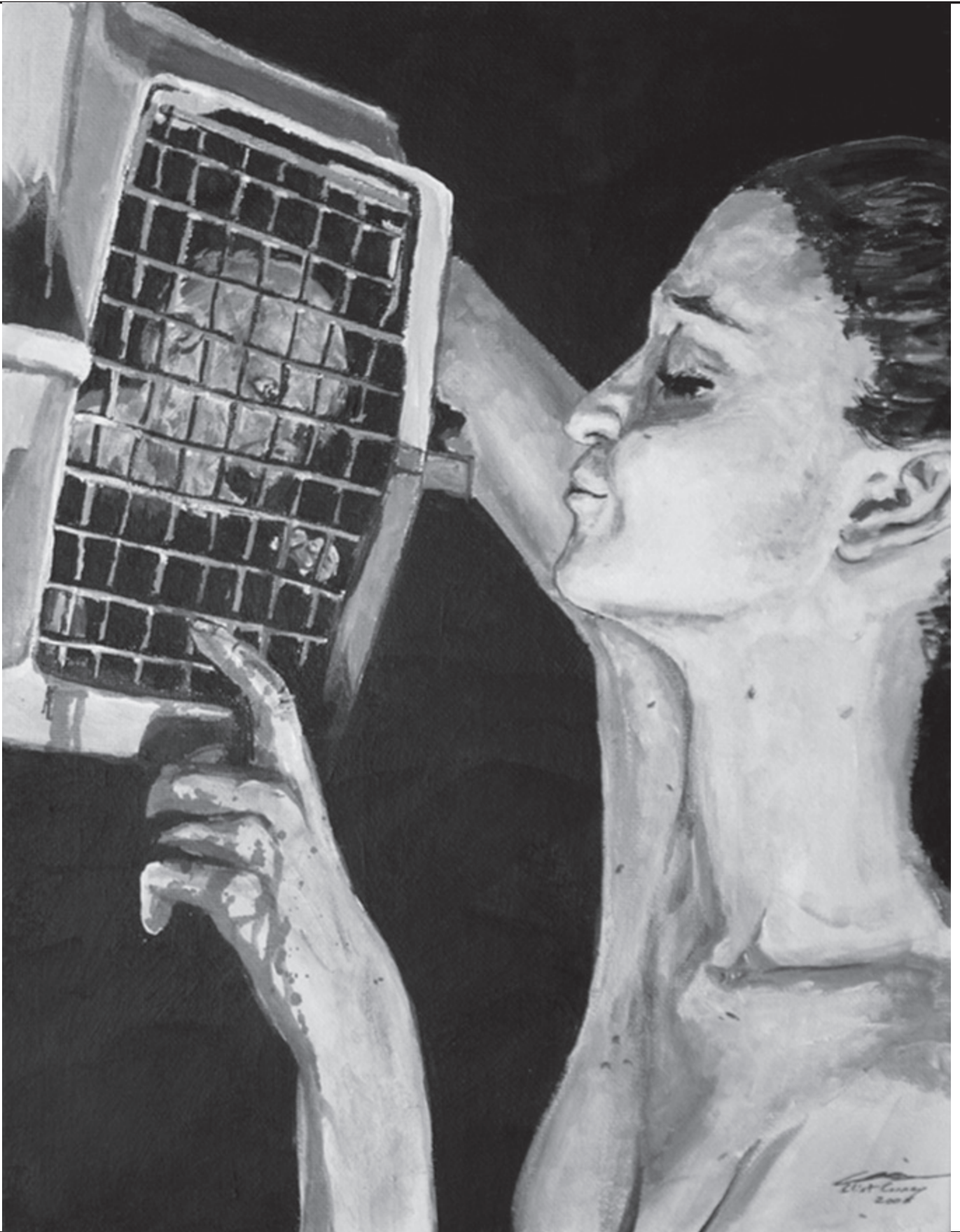
She moved
no she said
said
screamed
And could feel herself start to fragment her brain slowly in order to stay alive.

My mind had frozen to the bottom of his black memory,
And I was free to leave it.

My hot face, hot and wet for you because salt water won't freeze.
Then I took off my long coat
And where it had been attached was blood,
Steaming in the snow.
Naked now, so red and dripping.

Pulled your hand out of my pocket and wanted you back.
It had lost all its warmth and colour in just three hours.
I kept the left one, of course;

A knife for you was all I knew.



We Love to Eat Children

BY EDGAR SWAMP

ILLUSTRATION BY CLINT CARNEY

*AND THAT WAS
WHEN SHE HEARD
THE VOICE, A RASPY,
GRAVELLY VOICE THAT
SEEMED TO EMANATE
FROM EVERYWHERE AND
NOWHERE AT THE SAME
TIME. SIMULTANEOUSLY
SHE FELT THE PRESSURE
ON HER CHEST TIGHTEN,
FELT IT GETTING HARDER
AND HARDER TO BREATHE.*

ON SPINDLY LEGS THE GHASTLY LITTLE CREATURE made it's way down the hallway to the top of the stairs. Its head was oblong rather than round; it's eyes large and glassy. The mouth was a large upside down smile framed by rows of sharp, serrated teeth. The creature was probably only three feet in height, and maybe weighed only sixty pounds, with skinny arms and legs on a reptilian body, but as it stood with the light from the lone bulb swaying behind him, Jamie was as frightened as he'd ever been in his brief five years on this planet. His sister, Emily, stood beside him, peering up at the creature that stood before them, her normally boisterous demeanor silenced by the presence of this unwanted intruder. She reached out and took Jamie's hand. As she did so another identical creature came around the corner and joined it's friend at the head of the stairs, and now the two glowing sets of eyes became four. When the dual mouths opened, ugly black tongues licking their night crawler lips, Jamie and Emily turned and ran for the living room.

"Mom dad! Mom dad!" they shrieked, their voices overtaking the sound of explosions on the Friday Night Movie.

"Hey now! What the hell is this?" their father demanded, a can of Old Milwaukee in one hand, his other hand casually placed around their mother's shoulder. She was sipping a glass of white wine and between them on the couch was a large bowl of popcorn. "It's time that you two were in bed."

“Daddy!” Jamie burst out. “Daddy there is a monster at the top of the stairs!” He was almost out of breath due to anxiety, his eyes wet with tears.

“Two monsters!” Emily cried.

“What?” Edwin Lancaster said, dismayed at being interrupted because the movie they were watching was just getting good. Here he and his wife Amy had sat through all the boring crap to get to the juicy parts and this was when the kids decide they don’t want to go to bed.

“There are no monsters,” Edwin said patiently, taking a sip of his beer. “We exterminated for them last month and the man from pest control promised they wouldn’t be back.”

“But they are daddy, they are! They are right at the top of the stairs.”

“Come on kids, you’re getting a little too old for this, aren’t you?” their mother said, sipping her wine and tossing a couple of kernels of corn down. “Just be good and go to bed. Your father and I would like to be alone for a little while.”

“We’re not lying.” Emily said grimly, hoping she could convince them. She was, after all, almost two years older than Jamie and a much more reliable source. “There really are two monsters upstairs.” She swallowed thickly, looking rapidly from her mother to her father. “At least come and take a look.”

Their father rolled his eyes.

“At the commercial.” He finally relented and the children felt a surge of relief. “But you go upstairs and I’ll be right up after you.” He said and at once their spirits crumbled.

“But daddy we can’t get to our rooms, they are right at the top of the stai—”

“I’ve heard enough of this!” their father exploded, slamming his can of beer down on the coffee table, foam and beer erupting from the top and splattering large droplets on the cherry wood surface. “You two will go upstairs this instant and I will be up shortly!”

“But—”

“No buts! Not another word! Go!” he said, pretending as if he were going to rise quickly and give them a spanking and the two scampered out of the room. They walked slowly down the hall, stopping at the landing at the foot of the stairs.

Neither one of them wanted to look up into the dim light and see if they were there.

“You’re older than I am,” Jamie urged his sister. “You look.”

“Well, you’re a boy and supposed to be braver than me,” She countered. “You should have a look.”

“Uh-uh, I’m not doing it.” Jamie said and his sister sighed.

“If I look first I get your deserts for the rest of the week.” She said and the little boy frowned, but nodded just the same.

“Okay.”

“Are you sure? Mom made apple crisp.”

“I’m sure!” Jamie said fearfully. “Just look, please!”

Emily braced herself as she stepped up onto the landing, slowly turning and looking up the length of the stairs. Her gaze was on the first three steps, then the next three, then the next until eventually her eyes were at the top. She held her breath, her hands balled up in fists at her side

Nothing was there. The dim bulb that hung from a single electrical cord was still, it’s 60-watt glow inviting shadows, but no strange creatures lurked about. She turned to her brother whose eyes were tightly shut.

“It’s okay,” she said, a note of relief in her voice. “There’s nothing there.”

“Really?” Jamie asked, his voice trembling. “You’re not just trying to scare me, are you?”

“Why would I do that? I’m scared too!”

“Well, okay” he said, opening his eyes and stepping up onto the landing beside her.

There was nothing at the top of the stairs, and certainly no sign that anything ever had been.

“Where did they go?” he asked his sister, and the older girl shrugged. “They were there though, weren’t they Emily?”

The girl nodded, still staring ahead. “Yes,” she said, finally. “Yes they were.”

“Maybe they are hiding around the corner.” Jamie suggested, knowing that was their favorite spot—he and his sister—to jump out and scare each other. “That’s probably where they are.”

“Could be.” she said, averting her face from his, covering her mouth with her hand momentarily, and Jamie thought that she was struggling

not to cry.

In actuality, she was struggling not to laugh. Her little brother had such a wild imagination that the mere suggestion of anything remotely scary set him off. He probably really did *see* the creatures at the top of the stairs, even though he never would have known what they looked like if Emily hadn't described them to him in detail, a subtle fact that he'd long forgotten. She had been the one to point them out to him as they were walking up the stairs. Her little brother scared so easily it was almost impossible to resist messing with him. His sleepwalking and night terrors were ample proof of this.

"Take my hand and we'll go upstairs," Emily said reaching for his hand and Jamie wasted no time putting his sweaty palm in hers.

"I-I-I don't want to," Jamie said hesitantly. "Let's wait for dad."

"You heard what he said," Emily replied matter-of-factly. "It sounded as if he was ready to give us a spanking. We better do what he says."

Jamie considered this for a moment before finally nodding his head.

"Okay," he said and the two of them took the first step up. Then they took the second, then the third

"Their back!" Emily suddenly cried and Jamie looked up, saw the two creatures jump from around the corner, licking their slavish mouths, their teeth glimmering like sharp knives in the dim light, eyes gleaming a pale yellow glow.

"AAAAHHHHH!" Jamie screamed, and Emily clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Quiet!" she hissed. "You want mom and dad to hear you?" she said as he struggled alongside her, at last breaking free.

"Yes!" he said, his whole body quaking, his teeth chattering in his mouth. "I want them to hear me!"

"Well," Emily said, her tone growing cold, menacing, her eyes dark and foreign. "They don't want to hear you, in fact, they are the ones that sent the monsters here in the first place."

"Wh-wh-wh-what?" Jamie gurgled, his heart racing like a jackrabbit's.

"That's right." she said, looking up the stairs, causing him to look up as well. "They don't want

us anymore, so this is what they are going to do about it."

Jamie eyed the ghouls as they smacked their fat lips, tongues barely able to contain the saliva that drooled down their skinny torsos. Their thin arms were outstretched in front of them, rubbing their hands together as they looked at their prize for the evening: the gift of two little children.

"You're lying!" Jamie brayed, shock and dread filling him. This was like one of his worst nightmares—and believe it when told that he had some real doozies—the central theme being abandonment and isolation. "They would never do that to us!"

"Oh no?" she said, and then nodded up toward the horrifying beings. "Ask them," she suggested. "See what they tell you."

"They can't talk . . ." Jamie said, lowering his voice, keeping his head turned away.

"Yes they can," Emily said, reaching out and taking his head in both of her hands, turning it so that he faced the top of the stairs. "Go ahead," she cajoled him. "Ask."

Finally the young boy summoned all his strength and looked at the two cavorting things before him, took in their sallow green complexion, the thick, sticky sounds their slobbering mouths made as they opened and closed.

"Why are you here?" he at last dared to ask, raising his voice ever so slightly, putting some emphasis on it, as if to show that he wasn't scared. "What do want?"

The creature's greedy eyes looked upon him with an insane glee, the black pupils rolling in their sockets. Their long, thin hands fiddled in front of them at stomach level, lacing and unlacing, the black nails rubbing against each other making a sickening scraping sound.

"Oh . . . ?" one of them rasped, his tongue lapping at the saliva as it rained down, his elongated nailed feet curling over the edge of the top step as he perched himself like a bird. "You know what we want . . ." it hissed. "We want . . . to . . . eat you"

"Yes . . ." the other added, mimicking the motions of the other. "We love to . . . eat . . . little children"

And then the two of them laughed, a harsh, re-

volting sound that made the hair on the back of Jamie's neck stand on end. At once, he started crying, his whole body shaking.

"We have to go get mom and dad!" he said thickly through profound sobs, and Emily reached out for him, put her arms around him and held him in place. Maybe she had taken this whole thing a little too far. She didn't know what her little brother thought they said to him, but whatever it was it was about to make him crap his pants.

"Okay, okay, calm down Jamie, calm down," she soothed, rubbing her hands through his hair. "I'm just messing with you, all right? There is nothing there. I made it all up."

Jamie had his head buried in her chest, his whole body one shivering, sobbing mess. He was holding her so tightly that it was getting almost difficult to breath.

"Nu-nu-nu-no! Don't let them get me Emily! Don't let them!" he sobbed, burying his face deeper, tightening his grip on her.

"Relax Jamie!" she said, louder than she wanted, hoping their parents didn't hear. "I told you, I made it up. I was just trying to scare you, there is nothing there!"

She thought of how she stood next to him at the bottom of the stairs, pretending to see the troll-like *monsters*, describing them to him in a quiet, somber voice as he too stared, the image filling his subconscious mind and his imagination running away with it. She thought of how she did this to him when they were playing in the basement and a light bulb would burn out, how she would describe a ghost or some shambling zombie that was all of a sudden in the room with them, and how he ran for the stairs as if his very life depended on it, his little heart no doubt pounding at triple speed, a scream just waiting behind his clenched teeth

She thought of all the times that she and her parents found him sleep walking or crawling, his eyes as blank as those of a GI Joe, his mouth slack, his hands either out before him or at his side, sometimes mumbling, sometimes shouting

She was so sick of this little creep and his endless fears, but more than that, how easy it was to plant them in his mind.

"Let go of me Jamie," she said, more forcefully. "I made it up, okay? There is nothing there." She tried to free her arms to push him away but they were pinned to her sides. At once, his grip was more than just strong, it was *crushing*

"Let go of me you scaredy-cat! Let go or I'm going to tell mom and dad!"

That was when she heard the voice, a raspy, gravelly voice that seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Simultaneously, she felt the pressure on her chest tighten, felt it getting harder and harder to breath.

"No . . ." the voice said, and suddenly she saw that it was coming from Jamie. The little boy leaned his head back and she saw that his eyes were black and lifeless, his mouth like a large red O with rows of sharp, serrated teeth framing it. At once his long fingernails sunk into her skin, tearing the sleeves of her nightgown and drawing thick blood that ran down her arms.

"I'm going to tell mom and dad . . ." the voice grated, the volume low but the intensity high. "I'm going to tell them that the coast is clear . . . it's all going to be all right now . . ." he said, and at once she heard the claustrophobic sound of heavy breathing right behind her, closing in. She turned her head and saw her mother and father, or, at least, what used to be her mother and father, but now they had morphed somehow. Now they had oblong heads and thin bodies with long, skinny limbs and mouths that seemed to go on forever and ever and ever . . . but . . . this couldn't be . . . she had made it all up

The hands of her *parents* clutched at her roughly and she felt the cold as her nightgown was torn away.

"It's all right now . . ." Jamie gasped, wiping drool from his mouth, his arm coming back enslimmed. "She can see us for who we really are . . ." He made a sucking sound that put Emily's hair on end. She could feel a scream building in the back of her throat.

"Everything is okay," his gruff, wheezing voice forced out, his hands settling on his sister's throat and tightening until her world became a blackish-blue blur with little spots of light dancing around. He licked his lips as thick spit gushed onto his chin. "We can eat now"





www.aroundadarkcorner.com



The Sisypheous Syndrome

BY ISAIYAN MORRISON

ILLUSTRATION BY CLINT CARNEY

A RANDOM CONVENIENCE STORE ON A DESOLATE HIGHWAY IN A TOWN THAT WASN'T ON ANY MAP—IT WAS PERFECT. BUT WE SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER. *I SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER.* I THOUGHT HE WAS GOING CRAZY WHEN HE STARTED TO HEAR THE NOISES, BUT NOW I REALIZED I WAS WRONG. DEAD WRONG.

BEFORE FRANK REALIZED WHAT HAPPENED, I plunged the ink pen deep into his chest. His body lurched forward and blood spurted from the strike, peppering my face. I stood back and watched him drop to his knees and then to the floor. He gurgled, and his body shivered. I stood over Frank, quietly mouthing the word “sorry” as his life slowly slipped away.

I took a deep breath and glanced at the ceiling. I ignored the wallowing cries and the deep grumbles coming from the walls, swallowing the air around me. I covered my ears and I shook my head. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to kill Frank but I had to. He gave me no other choice.

He was the first to hear them. He said they were running through the walls, in the ceiling, and in the floorboards beneath our feet. He said they whispered in his ears, telling him we were trapped forever. He also said they ran past him, brushing up against his skin. Their voices tickled his ears, ridiculing our behavior and telling us we were never going to leave. Their demands echoed in his brain, and he believed the only way they were finally going to let him go was for him to kill me.

I thought Frank had gone crazy and as this unremitting day drew longer in this fucking store, I knew we were in deep shit. Frank couldn't see past their lies, and he began to lose hope. I did my best to suppress his fears, but in the end, his mania did him in.

“You killed him.”

Her voice exposed her fear and alarm, as her eyes fixated on the blood pooling around Frank's body, collecting in the crevasses of

the tiled floor. Her face dripped sweat, and she nervously slicked back her dark curls.

“He didn’t know what he was doing, Barbara.” My simply answer didn’t excuse my action.

Her bottom lip quivered, and she anxiously rubbed her forearms. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

I nodded. Yes, I knew exactly what I was doing. I’d done it before. Here, at the same Carver Street convenience store, at the same time, and on the same night; every damn night. It always started the same, but it always ended differently.

Frank and I planned this simple robbery a week ago. We agreed that he would go in first, then I would follow about five seconds later. If there were any customers, he would order them to the floor while I went for the register.

Instead, there was only Barbara.

We thought it’d be easier with just her in the store, but something went wrong. At first the door didn’t open. Then Frank started to hear the weird noises. The walls started to shake. He revamped our plan—without my input. He pointed the gun at Barbara and, before I knew it, he shot her.

This time, however, things would be different. I killed Frank before he could shoot Barbara. Her death before must have caused all of this. Now I believed with Frank out of the picture, this nightmare would end.

But I still needed the money.

“Empty the register.” I aimed my 9mm Beretta at her head. Barbara opened her drawer and handed me the money; a couple of fives and ones, a fistful of twenty-dollar bills, and three rolls of quarters.

“Please, don’t kill me—” Her voice cracked.

“I won’t, if you do as I say.”

I could do it. I knew I could pull the trigger as easily as Frank had, but I desperately wanted to free myself from this repeating nightmare. I didn’t want to find myself back in this god-forsaken store another damn minute.

I stuffed the cash into my pocket and took one more look at Frank’s lifeless body. I slowly and carefully walked backward to the front door, gun still aimed at Barbara’s blood-drained face.

“Okay Barbara. I’m going to do something I haven’t done before. I’m going to let you live.”

Her brow scrunched in puzzlement over eyes widened in fear.

I shoved open the door with my elbow, but it swung back, its metal frame connecting with my forehead. The blow stunned me to near-blindness, but I pushed at the door again. This time it didn’t budge. I looked back at Barbara and realized she held in her hand a cell phone.

I shoved the gun toward her and spoke through pain and clenched teeth. “You don’t want to do that.”

She startled and dropped the cell to the floor.

I clenched the trigger, but then I paused. It was becoming difficult to not kill her.

I lowered the gun.

“Barbara, listen to me.” I approached the counter.

Her hands were clasped together and her eyes shifted nervously from left to right.

“We’re going to do this differently.”

She lowered her head and I realized her entire body trembled.

“Are you listening to me Barbara?”

Her eyes cautiously reverted to me.

“You won’t die today, or tomorrow, or ever, by my hand.” I placed my gun on the counter, let my hand hover over it. “If I can help it, you’ll never see me again.”

Her rattled behavior didn’t change. Her breathing grew erratic. I could tell she didn’t believe me, and I didn’t blame her. “Barbara, you need to let me out of the store.”

“What do you mean?”

“The door is locked.”

“No, i-it isn’t.”

“Barbara, open the door.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s open.”

“Unlock the goddamn door!”

“P-please, just go. Take what you want and go.” Her lips quivered and her body shook, as if chilled.

I grasped the gun, picked it up, and pointed it at her. “Open the door.” I grabbed her wrist and dragged her from behind the counter. I then swung my gun in front of her face, motioning her toward the door.

She walked slowly, tentatively stepping over

Frank's body. I watched her from behind, staring at her tight blue jeans, her pink tennis shoes, her red t-shirt with the phrase "We value your service" written in big, white letters. She placed her hand on the door handle and looked back at me.

"Barbara, I'm not going to tell you again." I placed the steel barrel against her left cheek.

She pushed the door but it didn't budge. "It's not locked." She placed her body against the door, attempting to pry it with her weight. "I don't understand." She pointed to the lock and I focused my eyes.

She was right; it wasn't locked.

There was something hellishly wrong with this store. I felt it in my bones. I pushed Barbara aside and fired my gun at the glass. Small sparks resonated from the bullet, but the glass remained unscathed.

That's when I heard the moans.

The first sound came from the back wall, then another from beneath the tiled floor. Frantic now, I turned the handle and pushed with all of my strength, but still the door wouldn't budge.

"What's that?" I looked frantically from left to right. "What's that noise?"

Barbara shot me a confused glance.

The walls began to pulse, like a slow heartbeat, and the lights flickered continually. Somehow, the building itself had come to life.

And I had made it angry.

Barbara crumpled to the floor with her head in her hands. I kicked at the door's glass. The moaning grew louder, and the pulsing walls rippled violently.

I raised my gun and squeezed off a couple more rounds in the direction of the moans. Shelves stocked with chips and candy toppled over, landing atop Frank. The floor moved in a contorted bubble, bringing me to my knees. In an effort to break my fall, I dropped my gun. It skittered across the waving floor, and I crawled past Frank's lifeless body, trying to reach the counter.

I now wondered if I had done Frank a favor by killing him. If he escaped the worst by dying. Of all the heist jobs we'd done together, this was the only one he'd ever doubted. I was the one who wanted to do the heist. I pushed him into it. A random convenience store on a desolate high-

way in a town that wasn't on any map—it was perfect. But we should've known better. *I* should've known better. I thought he was going crazy when he started to hear the noises, but now I realized I was wrong. Dead wrong.

I heard the sound of a gun shot and I felt an immediate burning sensation on the left side of my neck. I tried to move, but my arms and legs went limp and I fell on my right side, feeling warm liquid rush across my Adam's apple.

Barbara stood over me, pointing my own gun directly at my chest. I tried to speak, to warn her, but I gurgled on the blood collecting in my throat.

Tears streamed down her face as she pulled the trigger again, but instead of hearing a gunshot, I heard the distinct click of the empty chamber.

I laid my head on the cold floor while the building continued to shake. Maybe death was the only way. Maybe it didn't matter if Barbara died, or not.

I closed my eyes, but then immediately opened them to a familiar voice.

"Open the register now!"

It was Frank.

I found myself on my feet with my gun pointed directly at Barbara. She was standing behind the counter with her arms raised in fear. I turned just in time to see the front door of the convenience store slam shut.

"Fuck!" I pushed on the door, hoping that it would open, but I was too late. It was locked. Frantically, I pushed again, but it wouldn't budge.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing?" Frank yelled.

I looked back at him. It was too late. It was starting again and I watched his actions replay like a D-rate horror flick.

"Get the money, bro." He smiled at me.

With my heart racing I reaffirmed my sweaty grip on the handle of the gun.

Suddenly Frank placed his hand on my shoulder. He looked up, then jerked his head to our right, then to our left, cocking his ear. "Hey bro, did you hear that?"





Interview with John Saul

INTERVIEW BY EMMANUEL PAIGE



John Saul was born in Pasadena, California on February 25, 1942, and grew up in Whittier where he graduated from high school in 1959. He moved around a lot during college, going from California, to Montana, and Ohio colleges, majoring in anthropology, liberal arts, and theater. He never obtained a degree.

After leaving college, he took up writing, deciding that it was a fitting career for a college dropout, and he worked at various odd jobs to support himself while developing his skill as a writer.

*He wrote several manuscripts that didn't find much success, but in 1976 he was approached by Dell and asked to write a psychological thriller. He was happy to oblige and wrote *Suffer the Children* within a staggering 30 day period. It appeared on the best seller lists, even hitting #1 in Canada. All of his subsequent books have been best sellers and have been published world wide.*

John resides in the Pacific Northwest, living in Seattle and the San Juan Islands, and also has a residence in Hawaii.

In addition to his novels, he also writes plays, acts in theater, and is a Vice President of The Chester Woodruff Foundation (New York), a philanthropic organization. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Northwest Writers Conference.



Macabre Cadaver: *What inspired you to become a writer?*

John Saul: It's simple. I had no other marketable skills.

MC: *Who is your favorite writer(s) of all time?*

JS: That's hard. I enjoy a number of authors. I think PG Wodehouse is one of my faves.

MC: *Which writer(s) had the most influence on you?*

JS: That one is easy. Noel Coward.

MC: *What is your writing schedule?*

JS: My schedule depends on my location. If I'm in the Pacific Northwest I usually work in the afternoon. When I'm in Hawaii I try to work in the AM. Currently I try to write one scene a day. I used to be able to write a chapter a day, but I'm old now!

MC: *Why did you choose to write stories of a darker nature?*

JS: Given my druthers, I would prefer to write

comedy, but the market for comedy is limited. When I started out I was willing to try anything and Dell Publishing Company needed someone to write dark thrillers. It was actually my editor who asked if I would try it. I did and discovered I was not only pretty good at it, but I liked the process itself.

MC: *You were a starving artists once. Did you ever feel like giving up?*

JS: I would extend my time frame. For example I would say, "If I'm not a successful author or playwright by the time I'm 25 I'll find another profession." But then I would extend the deadline another year or two. I did that many times.

MC: *Did you ever collect your rejection slips? Did you keep count? What was the grand total of rejections you collected before you made your first sale?*

JS: I never collected rejection slips. The fortunate thing is I didn't have many of them. I was one of the lucky writers who got published very early in their career.

MC: *Was *Suffer the Children* your first professional sale?*

JS: No, I had a couple of other sales, but they were not very successful and they were under pseudonyms.

MC: *I've read that you wrote *Suffer the Children* in a single month. How did you manage that? *Thirty days is an impossible amount of time to write a novel. It sounds a lot like Robert Louis Stevenson when he wrote *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Did you feel entranced when you were writing it?**

JS: Well, I had to do it. It was part of the contract. When you are a starving writer you will say "yes" to anything. I had a full outline of the action of the novel and it called for about 30 chapters. When I was in college I procrastinated to do my homework until the last minute. I figured I was able to write a fifteen page term paper in one day.

So, I just considered writing a chapter a day like writing a term paper every day. If I kept saying to myself that I had to write a book in a month I would've freaked and gone out to party instead.

MC: *I know you don't consider yourself a "horror writer" but some of your work is very horrifying, and is classified as such. What is your opinion of the horror genre, and do you think it is a dead market?*

JS: No, I don't think it's a dead market. I think it fluctuates like all markets. Right now I actually think it's on an upswing. The reason I don't classify myself as a horror writer is that some of my books are medical thrillers, some are psychological thrillers, some are straight thrillers and some are paranormal thrillers. Of course they are all on the dark side.

MC: *If you had to do it all over again (starving artist to accomplished writer) . . . would you do it the same way?*

JS: Absolutely! I've had a charmed career. And I'm still having it. (I'm not dead yet . . . I don't think.) I had fabulous people helping throughout my career. I've had and am still having a blast.



FEVER



A young boy unlocks a 200-year-old curse upon the children of a small town in the Appalachian Mountains. The sins of the citizens of the town will once again become the downfall of the children. Rants of madness and fever begin to take hold. Can Tommy stop what he has opened or will the children suffer the same fate as they did 200 years before?

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Class Seven

BY DEBORAH WALKER

ILLUSTRATION BY IVAN McCANN

THE MUTAGENIC
VIRUS FED ON THE
YOUNG; IT FEASTED
ON THE PLUMPEST
AND THE JUICIEST OF
GENES. ITS APPETITE
WAS VORACIOUS,
STEALING INTO THE
SLEEPING BODIES OF
THE SUSCEPTIBLE
CHILDREN.

EVERY MORNING, BEFORE SHE WALKED into the classroom, Mrs Belland took in a deep breath and fixed a smile upon her face. That smile remained in place, not matter what she encountered. Those first moments as she entered the classroom were the most difficult. The initial surprise could, potentially, shock her into reaction. It was important that the children had a least one place where they could be accepted, one place where they were not subjected to discrimination.

Today, she underwent her usual ritual, put on her brave smile and walked into the classroom. Thirty heads turned towards her, and smiled.

What new monstrosities had the night spawned?

“Good morning, class seven.”

“Good morning, Mrs Belland. Good morning, everyone.”

In one accord the children sing-songed their response. The sound was somewhat discordant, normal speech was difficult when it was transferred through the barrier of mandibles, or too many teeth, or

“Now has anyone any new mutations they would like to share with the class?” This too, was part of her ritual. Mrs Belland made their afflictions a point of interest. There nothing to be ashamed of.

Several hand shot into the air.

“Leane, you go first.”

The small girl stood up from the carpet. Her head was a curve of horn, ridged ivory threatening to obscure her dark iridescent eyes.

“I can do this,” she said, holding out her arm to the class. The small arm began to tremble until within its smooth surface tiny vesicles appeared. The vesicles bubbled on her skin; opening and closing. “Plick. Plick. Plick.” Her arm was a small arena of strange music.

“Very nice, Leane. But that’s not a new mutation is it? You showed us that last week, remember?” said Mrs Belland. *Leane—such a show-off.* “Has anyone had any *new* mutations to demonstrate?”

The mutagenic virus fed on the young; it feasted on the plumpest and the juiciest of genes. Its appetite was voracious, stealing into the sleeping bodies of the susceptible children. The morning would bring one of two new mutations, and these would be demonstrated without shame within Mrs Belland’s class.

Sometimes Mrs Belland thought that she could see the children growing stranger as they sat within this cheerful room. She thought she could see them growing along the weird pathways of their altered bodies, as she watched. That was nonsense. She reached for a glass of water. Looking at the outstretched hands of the children in front of her she selected Alphonse.

His body was a swirl of deviation, there was bound to be something new for him to demonstrate.

Alphonse stood up, slowly, painfully from his place on the carpet. Alphonse was snake-skinned with ever diminishing limbs. Movement was becoming increasingly difficult for Alphonse.

Where would he go when his differences became too much, for even this class of strangeness? thought Mrs Belland. Alphonse’s body was turning to wax, altering irrevocably through the constant assault on his genes.

Alphonse stood, a small smile on his face, and showed the class his new ability to retract his waxed arms into his body.

The class clapped in delight, and Mrs Belland took another sip of water.

“Very nice, dear,” she managed to say.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs Forren

entered, pushing a small boy in front of her. Mrs Forren didn’t even bother to hide her distaste as she viewed the children of class seven. A shudder ran through her, as she glanced at the corner of the children who were unable to sit upright, and who lay with a wild abundance of permutation on the classroom carpet.

Most unprofessional, thought Mrs Belland. *Still...*

“There’s a new boy for class seven,” said Mrs Forren. She spoke hastily; she wanted to leave this class room as quickly as possible.

“You can’t come in here,” said Alphonse. “It’s just for us muties, You have to be really special to come here.”

“But he is special,” said Mrs Forren. She beckoned over to Mrs Belland. “Can I have a word with you—outside?”

Mrs Belland walked towards the door. “Talk quietly amongst yourself, children. Introduce yourself to the new boy. What’s your name, dear?”

“Philip Artle.”

The children of class seven stared at Philip Artle—this wasn’t right. He was normal, this was a *special* class.

“You can’t stay here you know,” said Leanne. Philip shrugged.

Mrs Belland re-entered the room, her smile was the brightest the children had ever seen.

“Now class, we have a new child to welcome. Why don’t you come up to the front, Philip dear, and tell us all about your mutation?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it—my Dad said.”

“That’s quite alright, we’re different here. Come to the front and share your specialness with us.”

Phillip appeared reluctant.

“Come along.”

The children rustled excitably—perhaps he had a mutation in an unmentionable place.

“I bet he’s got two thingies,” said Alphonse, always the first to say what shouldn’t be said.

Leane giggled, her tongue flicked out, tasting the air. Cecile began to make her awful sounds.

“I read people,” said Philip.

“You can’t read *people*; you can only read books and stuff.”

“I can, I can.”

“Then read Mrs Belland,” said Alphonse.

“Yes, do it.”

“Read Mrs Belland.”

The blood drained out of Mrs Belland’s face. She was losing control of the class.

“No!” she said. “Class seven -hands on top.”

But she didn’t receive the correct response. The children were wild today, there was something pushing them forward.

“Do it. Do it. Do it,” they shouted.

Cecile began to screech, a wild and lonely cry.

“Do it. Do it. Do it,” shouted the class, they wanted to know what Mrs Belland thought.

“No. No. Children stop, Hands on top and that means stop.”

“Do it. Do it.”

When Philip spoke he spoke in the voice of Mrs Belland, his mutation, his gift, allowed him to read the replicate the precise flavour of her words.

“The virus is changing their minds now. When will the abominations stop?”

A small boy issuing the words of their teacher.

“They’ll all be destroyed. How much longer will we allow then to live? We just can’t accept so much awfulness.”

And the children became frozen by this new revelation. They put their hands on their heads and became silent.



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Hogger's Corner

BY OLLIE HANEY

ILLUSTRATION BY IVAN McCANN

EVIL WATCHED FROM THE DOOR AS THE OLD WOMAN HEADED INTO TOWN. ITS STOMACH GRUMBLED AS IT WATCHED THE OLD WOMAN; IT COULD CUT THROUGH THE WOODS AND FINISH HER OFF, BUT THAT WOULD BREACH THE AGREEMENT, THEN IT WOULD HAVE TO GO BACK WHERE IT CAME FROM.

EVIL LAY IN THE GRASS—TEETH BARED, EYES SHINING. It was patient; very patient. Night after night, It watched and waited. When the time came, Evil sprang on its victim. She screamed, but out here no one could hear her. It devoured her, except for the bones. It hated the bones; they were hard on Its stomach. When Evil was finished the bones looked like they had been cleaned with a powerful acid. It was a proficient eater. Old man Hudson had watched as it had eaten his wife, Bessy. She was a large woman, yet was consumed within hours.

Hudson Hogger supplied the food until he couldn't get people to come out to his place anymore. The pickings got slimmer and slimmer until it was Hudson's turn. His bones now lay gleaming in the moonlight out behind his barn, mixed in with the others that had been collected there over time. Evil scratched its thick head as It slunk to Hudson's barn where it stayed. The barn was warm and comfortable with plenty of hay in which to sleep. Evil poked around in the hay until it found a comfortable place to lie down. It lay there for a long time with its open eyes shining in the darkness of the barn. Every so often, teenagers would come by late into the night and Evil would feast upon the wayward teens. But, the occasional stray teen wasn't enough to keep Its stomach from rumbling. Soon It would leave Hogger's corner.

Evil could smell the longing and desperation on the wind. He

picked up a particularly strong scent and followed it until he came to the edge of the woods. Watching the old woman excited It, he raised his snout and drew deeply of the air. Evil knew this was where the deliciously desperate smell was coming from and quivered with anticipation.

The old woman sat on the front porch wishing that she could see the flowers. Their scent wafting on the afternoon air was so wonderful. Her eyesight was something that she wished for almost daily. The heady scent of the flowers began to change to something darker; it was a terrible smell of death and decay. She wished that her husband was on the porch with her so that he could tell her what was out there, but she could hear his loud congested snores from inside the house.

Evil came out of the trees and right up to the front porch. She wasn't afraid-- Evil had hoped she would be. It watched the old woman as It slunk back and forth in front of her, when she didn't move, not even her eyes, It realized that she was blind.

"Who is there?" She asked.

"The bringer of your wishes."

"Is that so", the old lady said, "and what have I wished for that you should bring?"

"You wish to see the pretty flowers, with all the colors of the rainbow sparkling upon them like a fairytale." Evil hissed tauntingly.

The hissing voice of the thing, reminded her of a broken radiator.

The old woman sighed heavily, "And I suppose that you could do that for me. You could fulfill my wish and give me my eyesight!"

"Indeed I can."

"What I don't understand is why you would want to help me."

"Because you are desperate, you wish your eyes to behold what your mind can only imagine."

"And for this gift, this wish fulfillment, what do you get in return?" she asked.

"Oh my dear lady, such pleasures don't come without a price. There will be an agreement."

"An agreement? What kind of agreement?"

"You must give me someone now, in return I will give you your eyesight. Then you will have to supply me with food. If you fail to bring me food I will eat you instead."

"How long will this agreement last? How long will I be indebted to you?" She asked tentatively.

"Until you fulfill your end of the bargain, or I grow bored of you."

"When do I know it's the end of the agreement?" She asked.

"I will tell you." Evil hissed.

"I give you someone now, someone to . . . eat. Where will I get someone on such short notice?"

Evil smiled although the old woman could not see it.

"Do I hear someone in the house?"

"My husband is sleep . . . ing." She said, realizing as she spoke what it was that Evil wanted.

Evil's deep laugh made goose bumps rise on the old woman's skin.

"You want to eat my husband?"

"Indeed."

She loved her husband; there was no doubt about that. But to see, that would be sublime. He *was* old, older than she, and he had spent his whole life seeing the world. He had taken good care of her over the years, but there had been times when he had grown annoyed with her blindness.

"I am an old woman," she sighed, "I can't have too much longer to live, and I would give anything to be able to see before I die."

"Then we have a deal?"

"We have," she said with a smile. "He's inside."

The old woman sat on the front porch rocking. The noise coming from inside the house sounded like a wet sloppy kiss from a child. From time to time she could hear chomping followed by ferocious growling. And the sloppy kiss sucking sound, there was always that. This thing that she had made a deal with was evil. Maybe she was a little evil herself, had to be, to give the life of her dear husband only so that she could see. And for how long? A year, maybe two.

The screen door slammed and the old woman smelled the thing beside her. It was the repulsive coppery smell of fresh blood. She wrinkled her nose hoping that the smell would go away. It was then that she noticed a dim light. Her heartbeat quickened as the dim light first blurred then slowly began to brighten. She squeezed her eyes shut and counted to one hundred. She gasped as she opened her eyes. The flowers, the sky, the con-

trasting colors of the trees took her breath away. It was a full minute before she could force herself to breath again.

“Do you like what you see old woman?” Evil asked.

“Yes,” she said standing up abruptly, “I . . . I can’t believe how beautiful everything is.”

The old woman walked slowly into the yard looking around. She wanted to see all the beautiful things before she had to look upon the things face.

That night Evil slept in the front room. The old woman could hear It breathing all the way into her bedroom. It was a dreadful sound that gave her nightmares whenever she dared sleep. She missed the comforting warm body of her husband beside her. For the first time since the thing had come to the front porch she began to worry about what she’d done.

The next morning the old woman woke up cranky from a lack of sleep. The smell of the filthy beast emitted from every crevice in the house. It had only been here for a day but the house smelled like It had lived here all its life.

“I’m hungry.” It said as she went into the kitchen.

“What do you want?”

“Who do you hate?” Evil asked her.

“Lots of people, I guess, people that can see.” She told It thinking about the people in town that had made fun of her blindness for so many years.

“Then that’s what I want.” Evil replied.

“I doubt that they are going to rush right in here.” she said.

“Just get them here,” it hissed as it breathed hot air on the back of her neck, “or you will end up like your husband.”

The old woman sighed. “How am I supposed to get into town?”

Evil was still breathing down her neck. The old woman shivered.

“Fine, I’ll manage, I *can* see now.” she told It realizing what it might mean to have her sight back.

Evil watched from the door as the old woman headed into town. Its stomach grumbled as It watched the old woman; It could cut through the

woods and finish her off, but that would breach the agreement, then It would have to go back where It came from. It wasn’t allowed to kill the old woman. The screen door slammed as It ran from the house into the woods. Evil would follow the old woman to see how she made out.

The old woman knew It was following her. It smelled too bad to hide from anyone. But she didn’t think that It would kill her until she gave It a good reason. The agreement she had made with the thing yesterday evening floated through her mind. As long as she kept feeding It, she didn’t think It *could* kill her.

It wasn’t hard to find Norma in town. Usually, when the old woman went to town, Norma found her. Norma was famous for running the old woman into posts just for laughs. She would be the very first one that the old woman would give to the thing. The old woman invited Norma to her house for coffee and conversation. She had to pretend that she was still blind, which wasn’t as easy as the old woman thought it would be. There were so many things in town that she wanted to see. But Norma would ask too many questions, if she found out that the old woman could see now. The old woman bought a few groceries before heading for the dirt road with Norma walking beside her. When they approached the bend in the road that couldn’t be seen from town, the old woman felt the wind pass by her in a gust and Norma was gone. She could hear the wet smacking sounds from the woods and knew that she would never have to put up with Norma again.

As she walked home, the old woman started to wonder how much a thing like this would eat? What if it wanted her to go out again at noon or at night? If It wanted three meals a day she would have to find a way to get people to come to her. She might be able to do what she had done with Norma again but soon people were going to get suspicious. When she could no longer hold up her end of the bargain then it would be her turn to get eaten. She shivered at the thought.

When she got back to the house, she sat down to rest. It was coming back to the house. She could tell by the awful smell in the air. The screen door slammed and the stench filled her nostrils. The thing was laughing.

“Perfect, you have done your job well.” It hissed.

The old woman remained silent as a sickening knot began to form in her stomach. The smell of fresh blood mingled with rotting flesh filled her nose and made her gag. She wasn't going to be able to do this, the stench, the horrible sucking sound of flesh being ripped from the bone, the long walks into town, leading people back to the house; all of this was too much for her. She would have to find a way to get out of the deal that she made with this evil thing.

At lunch, the thing was hungry again. The old woman didn't see how It could actually be hungry. Maybe It was trying to see if she was going to be able to supply it with food. As she walked, she tried to think of a way to get people to come to her house, going into town three times a day was chancing getting caught. If she needed help with something, she should be able to get someone to come out. Last summer her husband went into town to get help with the garden. Gasping, the old woman knew that would be the way to get people to come to her house. Everyone in the area loved her vegetables so much, they would come to her house to buy them. She was pleased with herself. She figured out a way to feed the thing now she was home free.

The old woman literally ran into Homer in town after passing the word around that she would be selling vegetables at her house. She asked him to come to the house and help with her garden. They were almost to the house when the old woman smelled the putrid air from the thing. There was a startled scream then she could hear It eating as she went into the house. She lay down on her bed, covering her head with a pillow, and went to sleep.

The old woman was dreaming that she was in a very hot place that stunk of death. She was scared. Then, something was shaking her. The old woman realized that the thing was in her room trying to wake her up. It was suppertime and It was hungry again. The old woman sighed and got up. She would have to go to town again. All of the walking that she was doing was tiring her out. She was glad that this part would soon be over.

Most of the townspeople were at home enjoying their supper. If it wasn't for the town bar, she

would have failed to get the thing something to eat. The old woman walked to the bar waiting outside until a drunk stumbled out of the bar. He ran into her and said that he was sorry.

“That's alright,” she said, “I was wondering if you could help me.”

“Sure lady,” he slurred, “I think I can.”

“Follow me please.”

As they entered the road that led to the old woman's house the drunk asked where they were going.

“To my house.” She told him.

Before the drunk could reply he was swooshed into the woods. The old woman continued walking, covering her ears with her hands.

She lay in her bed listening to the sounds around her. It was morning but she didn't want to get up. There must be something that she could do about the thing. Her legs and feet were sore from all of the trips into town. Today she was feeling her age. The old woman could hear the thing in the front room waiting for her to get up. She wished that It would just go away. She heard screaming from the other room. Jumping out of bed, she ran to the front room. It hissed and screamed, making the hair stand up on the back of her neck.

“Don't you dare.” It hissed.

As she went back to her room she wondered if somehow she'd hurt the thing, if so what had she done? If she could get rid of It, how would she go about it? She could hear Its rapid breathing in the front room. It was trying to recover from whatever happened to It. She went back over what she'd been thinking when It had screamed, but that didn't make sense to her. She dressed and went into the kitchen.

“Old woman I could kill you now.”

“Really, then why don't you?”

“Don't you ever do that again.” Evil said and left the kitchen.

The old woman was busy washing vegetables in the sink when she heard the first car pull up. With the banging of the screen door, she knew that the thing had just eaten its first meal of the day. Before she could ditch the first car in the woods, another car had pulled up. The driver got out of the car smiling at her when Evil ran from the house and attacked him. She wanted to turn away, but Evil had ripped a big chunk of bloody meat

from the man's chest. Strings of muscle and blood ran from Evil's mouth as it chewed. When she was finally able to tear her eyes away from the horrible sight, she threw up in the driveway. At the end of the day the thing had eaten everybody that came to buy vegetables. The old woman didn't know how the thing could eat so much and still be so fast. She was so tired, more tired than she could ever remember being. It had been a long day of running in and out of the woods, hiding cars and cleaning up bones that made her retch every time she touched them.

The old woman was so exhausted she couldn't think, she fell into bed and was sleeping immediately.

She dreamed that she was walking through a field of fire. There was a long, narrow piece of land that she was walking on; if she fell off, she would be dead. Sporadically, there was a fiery shape rising out of the fire, screaming. Somehow she knew these were the souls condemned to hell. She walked for a long time on the strip of land until she could see somebody in the distance. The person was so far away that she could not tell who it was. The old woman kept walking knowing that she had a goal. And with that the fire disappeared, it was cool around her and so white, it hurt her eyes. A swirling of clouds transformed into a face. When the face spoke to her, the old woman was scared until she realized that the clouded face didn't intend to hurt her. Still, she had an uneasy feeling about it. The face was telling her that it was *so* simple to get out of this mess. The old woman looked at the cloud face confused.

"How, how do I get out of this?"

"You already have the answer." the cloud taunted. "I wish, I wish, I wish!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Wishes, old woman are very powerful things. Some things, such as you are dealing with, must grant your wish."

"It did," the old woman cried, "It gave me my eyesight."

"Indeed it did, so you must wish again."

"Can I wish it away?"

The cloud began to swirl and disappear in front of her.

"Answer me!" she screamed.

As the last translucent swirl disappeared the old woman heard, "I wish, I wish, I wish!"

The old woman sat up in bed. The answer was so simple and was there all the time. She raised her voice as loud as she could and said,

"I want you to go away."

The thing screamed from the other room then stopped.

"Nice try, old woman."

The old woman frowned thinking about the dream.

"I wish you would go away, just go back where you came from."

Evil started to scream. The old woman could hear It hissing and spitting as It came for her; black goo ran from its eyes and mouth. To the old woman it appeared to be melting. As It bounded toward her, she pushed herself as close as she could to the headboard. It jumped on the bed looming over her, hissing and spitting.

It lowered its dripping snout until it was nose to nose with the old woman.

"Wishing is a fairytale trick old woman." It hissed.

Now the old woman could see that the thing wasn't melting, it was swirling and she knew why she had felt such uneasiness from the cloud in her dream. She opened her mouth to scream and the thing swirled into her mouth, choking her. The old woman threw her head back violently banging her head, and knocking herself out in the process.

When the old woman awoke, her head hurt. She prodded lightly with her fingers searching for cuts. When she was sure there were none, she moved to the edge of the bed, listening. When she didn't hear any sounds in the house, she got out the bed.

The old woman crept to the kitchen, looking through the house to make sure that It was not there. She was ravenous. Once in the kitchen she looked in the refrigerator but nothing seemed appetizing. She could smell the man on the front porch before she heard him knock and knew what she was hungry for. The old woman licked her lips as she went to the front door and let the man in the house.





Miss Rhoads Never Did Mention the Blood

BY PAUL EDMONDS

ILLUSTRATION BY EMMANUEL PAIGE

HE YANKED HIS HAND UP TO HIS FACE AND STARED IN HORROR AT THE CLAY TOOL DRIVEN INTO HIS PALM. IT HADN'T MADE IT THROUGH THE BACK OF HIS HAND; A TINY PATCH OF SKIN STRETCHED INTO A MINIATURE TEEPEE OVER THE SHAPE OF THE TOOL'S SHARP POINT. BLOOD SPRAYED FROM THE WOUND AND ONTO THE TABLE IN THIN, DELICATE THREADS.

BUTCH HADN'T PLANNED ON A DIZZYING carriage ride down a pot-holed memory lane when he awoke from the haze of his dreams that morning. The one-way ticket came in the form of the morning paper, rolled and bound with a single thin elastic wrapped twice around its bulge. He retrieved the paper, brought it up to the porch, and sat down in a rickety old chair.

The headlines above the fold relayed standard small town news: the Saint Francis Church bake sale was a success; a few hundred books were donated to the library by a local widow; police had finally apprehended those responsible for the missing milk crates behind Victory Supermarket. Below the fold was a photograph of an unpleasant-looking batch of school children manipulating mounds of cement-colored clay. The caption read: *Mrs. Talbot's kindergarten class express their artistic sides through a fun medium.*

Butch closed his eyes. When he reopened them, tears spilled over the rims and trailed down his cheeks. He folded the paper, tossed it into a trash can, and went inside.

A visitor to Butch's home, if he were to ever have a visitor, would be startled by the sharp contrast between the house's placid exterior, with its bright green shutters and respectable landscaping, and the depressed condition of the interior dwellings. Expired hunting catalogs reached towards the ceiling in uneven stacks. Dishes, crusted with the vestiges of meals long ago consumed and evacuated, overflowed from the sink and onto the counter. Sunlight breached the darkness of the kitchen through frayed rips in the soiled curtains.

Long shreds of wall paper hung to the floor like the coarse, filthy hair of some enormous beast. Butch had lived his entire adult life alone, and as his despair grew thicker with the passage of time, his attentiveness to affairs of a domestic nature had grown weaker.

Butch lumbered to the refrigerator and removed a plastic milk jug filled with flat Coca-Cola and rum. He chugged hard until the last drop slid down his throat then tossed the jug into the corner. He moved into the living room and flopped onto the sofa. An orchestra of springs played a series of sharp notes as he repositioned himself several times to find the sweet spot.

It was the photograph of the kids with their tiny hands thrust into clay that had gotten Butch maudlin on an otherwise fine late fall morning. He looked at the tiny scar on his left hand and had to fight back more tears. It had been clay, or, more specifically, a green plastic clay knife that had opened John Andrews' eyes to Butch's presence and the thick cloud of vulnerability and victimhood that seemed to follow him everywhere like an albatross.

Before Butch had grown into a portly man, he had been a diminutive boy. He was constantly mistaken for a student in classes one or two grades below his. This often resulted in some student teachers-aid, eager to set things right, forcing him into a schoolyard recess line with children who were not his classmates. This seemingly perpetual series of misunderstandings had been fertile ground for a lush garden of short jokes from the more vocal and less empathetic pupils at Sanders Street School.

Butch withdrew. Recess breaks were spent walking the perimeter of the schoolyard. He would fantasize about playing kickball or tag with the others, but no offers of play were extended to him. As time went on, he accepted his place in the schoolyard pecking order, and his thoughts never again flirted with silly hopes of friends and schoolyard tomfoolery.

He made his way up through elementary school without any major disturbances to his sheltered world until the third week of sixth grade when Mrs. Goudi's students were ushered into a large converted storage room that served as the school's

art center. Town funding had dried-up before the room had been completed. Electrical wires snaked around beams in the exposed ceiling, and the faint smell of old building rot nagged incessantly at everyone's nose.

The students were separated into groups of four. Each group had their own table, a large mound of clay, and a set of clay tools spread on black towels covered in lint. Miss Rhoades, the art teacher, announced that they would be doing something a little different that day. Instead of spending the entire period working on a single piece, they would work in five-minute shifts. All four members would work together, quickly, to create a clay model based on a theme she would read from a stack of index cards. After five minutes they would stand back, admire what they'd created, and smoosh everything together to prepare for the next one.

The first index card called for an animal one might find at the zoo. The children eagerly tore off large chunks of clay and began pressing and shaping individual body parts that would be assembled to create one cohesive form. The animals that resulted were at once hilarious and sad. Little Frankenstein bears and kangaroos stood in the middle of the work tables, their basic anatomies crippled by legs, paws, and ears of mismatched lengths and thicknesses. The animals looked sickly, afflicted with various defects ranging from scoliosis to gigantism. Butch and the rest of his group stared, with a mixture of curiosity and disappointment, at a rabbit-penguin hybrid that looked like it was caving-in on itself. Miss Rhoades called time and the animals were pounded back into nondescript lumps.

The process repeated; food, furniture, and musical instruments were carefully crafted at each table, with equally dismal results.

Miss Rhoades looked up at the clock. Her sluggish hand pulled one more index card from the deck. "Alright, everyone," she called, "this is the last one, so make it good. This will be an individual effort. The last theme is things you'd find on a tropical island."

Butch's mind scanned its repository of images for something that might be found on a long expanse of sand littered with tourists. He remem-

bered something he'd seen in his dad's office at the chair factory. Hanging from a rusty nail above his dad's cluttered metal desk was a glossy photo of a scantily-clad blonde on all fours looking seductively into the camera. Sand clung to her body in sticky patches, a large yellow umbrella casting a long shadow over her curvaceous figure.

Sitting at the table, his lump of clay peppered with several classes worth of lint and hair, Butch focused on the memory of that photo and the gentle stirring it had jump-started in his corduroys. He smiled and went to work. He constructed the top of the umbrella then set about fashioning a stand that would support the weight and awkward shape of the top. The first stand was too long and narrow; it collapsed immediately. He then constructed a thicker bottom piece, but that proved no good, either. Nervousness began to grip Butch like the cold hand of some hateful beast. His group mates had all managed to work-up something passable, and the last thing he wanted was to be the odd man out, because that would draw attention from not only the other students but also Miss Rhoades. Anonymity, as much of it as he could get, was the name of his game. He had to improvise, and quick, because he could see Miss Rhoades checking her watch and returning the index cards to the top drawer of her desk. His eyes darted around the table, finally settling on the untouched line of clay tools waiting patiently on the black blanket. He selected one that looked like a plastic knife you'd get in a fast food restaurant and quickly packed clay around it. He placed the top of the umbrella onto the reinforced stand, and it worked!

Miss Rhoades called time. The class turned from their projects and started in on their own personal conversations. Miss Rhoades strolled from table to table, bestowing on occasion "nice job" or "good eye for detail" on a piece that struck her as not completely terrible. She arrived at Butch's table with a flurry of cool air and perfume. She moved in close to examine his umbrella. Butch's asshole puckered-up with fear; he must have misheard her instructions, failed to complete the requirements of the exercise in some way. Tiny pistons smoked and squealed in his heart as five seconds turned into ten then twenty.

Miss Rhoades placed a tiny hand on Butch's shoulder. "Well, done, Butch. I'm declaring this the best sculpture of the day so far." She smiled and moved onto the next table.

Butch's tension subsided. He felt proud of his minor artistic accomplishment, but worried that Miss Rhoades' compliment might draw attention from the others in his group. They would look at him with wide eyes, not to admire his work, but to deride him. His classmates would always pounce on an opportunity to reduce Butch to a punch line just like a barn cat would pounce on a gimp mouse. He looked up and glanced at his table mates. They were immersed in the details of their own preoccupations. Butch felt relieved that he had made it through another social interlude without incident.

Miss Rhoades gave instructions for cleanup. Clay tools were swept hastily into large plastic storage trays. Students went nuts smooching their sculptures, consolidating the clay into large, smelly lumps. Butch sat in his seat with sullen eyes; he had to destroy his masterpiece, the creation that had garnered him rare positive recognition. He stared lovingly at his umbrella and remembered the attractive blonde in his father's photo. Oh, how her eyes had called out to him! There had been something about the girl that excited him in ways his eleven-year-old libido didn't fully understand, yet understood completely.

Butch's thoughts were so entrenched in the heavenly details of the attractive blonde that he forgot all about the plastic knife encased in clay. He brought his hand down forcefully on top of the umbrella. Pain needled up his arm like someone had injected his hand with battery acid. He yanked his hand up to his face and stared in horror at the clay tool driven into his palm. It hadn't made it through the back of his hand; a tiny patch of skin stretched into a miniature teepee over the shape of the tool's sharp point. Blood sprayed from the wound and onto the table in thin, delicate threads. The top half of the tool was stripped of clay, the green plastic looking like exposed bone underneath dead flesh.

Butch's mouth twisted into an expression of shock that was almost comic. He used the index finger and thumb of his free hand to dislodge the

tool. Rivulets of blood ran down his wrist, spreading dark red stains up the arm of his grey flannel shirt. Blood collected in tiny pools on the table's surface, cracked and carved-up from decades of art class vandalism. He looked around frantically, expecting Miss Rhoades and the other kids to have witnessed the tragedy of his absentmindedness. No one had noticed. He stood up with the quickness of a puma, sending his chair into the radiator behind him. Before he could see if anyone noticed the loud crash of the wooden chair against the radiator's metal sheath, he was out the door and in the cool air of the deserted hallway.

Ducking into the boys' room, Butch was greeted with a rancid mixture of bleach and feces. He moved to one of two sinks bolted to the wall and ran his hand under cold water. At first another flurry of pain ran up his arm, but the coldness of the tap water soon served as a mild numbing agent. He wrapped his hand in a brown paper towel and moved into one of the stalls, closing the door behind him. A single bare light bulb hung over the stall. He unwrapped the bandage and examined the wound under the bulb's cheap yellow glow. The wound wasn't as large as the first bolts of pain and the blood had led him to believe; it was only about a quarter inch across. The bleeding had slowed to a crawl, and the pain had weakened to a dull throb.

Butch exited the stall, washed the tears from his face under another blast of cold water, and exited the bathroom. The period had ended while he was dressing his hand. Lunch hour had arrived. Fifth and sixth graders groped their way through the swell of other students en route to the cafeteria in the basement. He walked back to Miss Rhoades' room and peeked through the long rectangular window in the door. His stomach sank as he spied Miss Rhoades pumping the trigger on a plastic spray bottle filled with blue liquid and wiping a clump of paper towels over the small pools of blood on the art table.

Butch dashed up the hall. He stopped at the classroom, retrieved his sack lunch, and crashed through the front doors. An insanely bright September afternoon greeted him. Students were supposed to eat their lunches in the cafeteria, but Butch dismissed protocol and settled on a hot ce-

ment window ledge on the far side of the building near the basketball hoops. The humid schoolyard air brought tiny drops of moisture to the surface of his skin. Sweat collected underneath his paper towel bandage and stabbed at his wound. Peeking into the darkness of his paper lunch sack, he retrieved a bologna sandwich, tore it from the foil, and sank his teeth into it. The morning had been a long, grueling ordeal, and he needed to fill his tank.

Butch was down to his last bite when a long shadow washed over his body like an angry storm cloud. He looked up and saw John Andrews. A ripe mixture of body odor and hair grease wafted off of John and loitered in the air between them.

John leaned in. His yellow teeth jutted crazily from his gums in a crooked formation. His breath was a vibrant bouquet of Cheetos and wood rot. John had seen what happened in art class, witnessed the whole mess. He even ran his finger through the smatterings of blood on his way out the door, a spark in his eye and the urge to laugh rumbling in his throat. He swatted the last piece of sandwich from Butch's hand; it fell to the ground and quickly summoned the attention of several large ants.

Butch's eyes widened. He stared up at John, already prepared to accept whatever awaited him with no fuss or fight. Butch's reluctance to retaliate was due less to the fear of amplifying John's fury as it was to getting into hot water with the disciplinary matrons of the schoolyard.

John leaned in closer and made long sniffing sounds, moving his nose about Butch's face and neck. "Hmm, smells like a ripe old pussy to me." He took a step back. His husky frame loomed over Butch. "Yeah, I saw what happened back there. Saw that blood spray outta ya like a stuck fuck-in pig." He laughed the way a crazy old shut-in might laugh after confiscating a child's kickball.

Butch curled the lunch sack in his hands. The movement folded fingernails into his palm, drawing fresh blood that soaked through his paper towel bandage. His eyes followed John's movements. He said nothing.

"Then," John continued, raising an index finger, "you ran outta there all scared like a big fuck-in pussy." He smiled wide. Chapped lips broke

apart under yellow scabs.

Butch backed into the window behind him; he could retreat no farther. The outline of John's body was carved into the sun's bright glow. From where Butch sat, a fiery halo stretched around John's head and down his shoulders.

"What do you want?" is all that slipped past Butch's lips.

John paused. In his brief career as a schoolyard thug, he had never before been asked that question. His ubiquitous and non-discriminating bullying had always been accepted without question. His victims generally regarded it as something that simply existed, like clouds or green grass, without devoting much time to contemplating some deeper meaning or purpose.

John squinted and looked at Butch's bloody bandage. "Lemme see where you got stuck," he said. "I wanna see what got your panties in a bunch."

Butch pressed his hand to his chest and shook his head. John grabbed at his wrist and started to pull. Butch made the mistake of letting one of his thrashing legs connect with John's muscled thigh. John retaliated by pulling Butch's head back by the hair. The sounds of tiny hairs being ripped from his scalp bounced around in Butch's skull. Sweat rolled down from Butch's forehead and into his eyes. That was all the leverage John needed to seize control of Butch's bandaged hand. John pulled the bandage off and let it fall to the asphalt. Butch's bloody wound was littered with flecks of brown paper towel lint. John used his thumbs to spread the wound apart, forming a tiny mouth in the palm of Butch's hand. Butch started to cry, which only served to amuse John. Laughing grunts came through John's nose.

"Oh, c'mon," John said. "This ain't nothin but a scratch. You got all fuckin weepy over this?" He poked at the tiny red mouth with his thumb nail. Butch, racked with pain and humiliation, closed his eyes and turned his head.

Groups of students began to flow into the schoolyard. A boy dribbling a basketball walked up to Butch and John, and looked at them with a vacant expression.

"Fuck off," John said, and the boy ran way.

Butch turned his head to the side. The wound

was still bleeding. John wiped the blood aside with his thumb. It was then that Butch's mind grasped the subjective meaning of what it meant to be crazy. No one else was with them to enjoy John's clever display of theatrics. This was for John's amusement alone. Butch wanted to vomit, but held back lest John's fury flare to some uncontrollable level.

The schoolyard was filling quickly with more students. Basketball games were forming and the hopscotch grid already had a line eight deep. John maintained a strong hold on Butch and took a quick look around to see if they were being watched. They weren't. John turned back to Butch. John's expression had softened to one of mild befuddlement. He seemed to be staring not at Butch but at the pane of glass at Butch's back. Butch then realized that John was looking at his own reflection. John's chapped lips parted slightly, and his breathing grew longer, deeper. Butch contemplated pulling from John's grip and running apeshit back into the building. But before he could do so, John's eyes refocused on him. John's filthy smile reappeared, his tombstone teeth looking moldy in the shadows of their close proximity. It was then that Butch saw John's neck moving in and out, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as wet sucking sounds came from somewhere behind his flesh. John pulled Butch's hand forward, the crusty red mouth staring up at the blazing sun. Butch's tears grew fatter, his nose ran uncontrollably. With a single quick movement, John lowered his head above Butch's hand and let a large glob of phlegm escape from between his pursed lips. The thick green glob grew thinner, longer, until it became a string that dangled just above Butch's hand. The wind picked up and the string did a little dance before it met with Butch's open wound. The phlegm pooled in the tiny red mouth and overflowed into Butch's palm. The phlegm followed sweat-slicked folds and wrinkles, stretching out to form slippery wet tentacles.

Butch thought he was going to faint. It was the fear of what John might do to his limp body that pulled him back from the brink. John let out a loud cackle, drawing the attention of Mr. Bishop, who was on recess duty that week. Butch's eyes met with Mr. Bishop's.

John's instincts must have sent out a signal; he turned and saw the kindly old teacher walking towards them. John turned to Butch and whispered in his ear, "That's a little something to help that cut heal. Don't mention anything or I'll put my fist up your ass." He released Butch's hand, turned without acknowledging Mr. Bishop, and casually strolled around the side of the building.

Mr. Bishop approached Butch. Butch looked up at him with red, watery eyes. His wounded hand was curled into a fist and stuffed under his armpit.

"What did he do to you, Butch?" Mr. Bishop asked. His voice was stern yet gentle. He had been Butch's fourth grade teacher. Mr. Bishop had a soft place in his heart for Butch. He worried about him. Butch was bright, but terribly timid. Mr. Bishop could envision the beating the world would inflict on Butch if he didn't find some courage and strength. He had miserable thoughts of Butch hurting someone if he couldn't claw his way out of the sheltered world he'd created for himself.

"I . . . well . . . everything's fine, Mr. Bishop," Butch mumbled under quick, sharp snorts. He wiped his nose with the back of his good hand. "Everything's fine. John was just asking me something about class."

Mr. Bishop knelt down and put his hand on Butch's shoulder. "Well, Butch, from what I can see, everything is definitely not fine." He scratched underneath Butch's chin to get him to look up. "You know, Butch, I'm your friend. There's nothing you can tell me that will get you into trouble. And no one will hurt you for what you tell me, I'll make sure of it."

Butch stifled the urge to spill his guts. He politely reiterated that everything was just fine and walked away before Mr. Bishop could make another attempt at extracting the source of his troubles.

Butch went back into the building and hid in the custodian's closet for the remainder of lunch. He rinsed his hand in the giant sink. The phlegm had begun to dry and he used his fingers to wipe it from his skin. The water sent burning waves through his hand and into his wrist. The area around the wound had gotten darker, redder. He

got some powdered soap from a dispenser on the wall and cleaned his wound the best he could, biting his lip to stave off more tears.

Butch soldiered through the rest of the day, went home, and watched reruns of Mr. Ed until his mother got off work. He tried hard to hide his busted hand, but it was no use. His mother picked up on his odd behavior and nearly shrieked when she removed his napkin bandage and saw a swollen, infected hand. Stricken with horrified concern, she drove him to the emergency room. He returned to school the next day.

Butch had a few more run-ins with John Andrews that year, but all were minor in nature, comparatively speaking. John moved away the following summer. He never spoke a word to anyone about the day he hocked a clam into Butch's open flesh. John kept that pleasant memory all for himself.

Over the next couple of decades, Butch's thoughts would revisit the day he impaled his hand with the clay tool. John's menacing eyes, the shame of being victimized in front of his favorite teacher, the bloody smile puckering its bloody red lips, everything would play out in crisp Technicolor in that place where present time ends and memory begins. It was not the defining moment in his life, just a single floor plank of the small warehouse that was his mind. A warehouse crammed with pallets of single-serve emotions and televisions that would only display a single wavy vision of the human condition.

Butch now sat on his creaky old sofa. White lines ran down his dirty face where tears had forged their paths. The house sat silent. The early morning picture show had just ended, and his mind snapped back into the present with the force of a car wreck. He rubbed his eyes and made his way towards the liquor cabinet; he needed to take the edge off. He knelt down at the splintered pine cabinet and rooted around inside. Most of the bottles were empty. His hand seized upon a bottle of clear liquid, the label missing, peeled off. He uncapped the bottle and downed what was inside.

He was about to wipe his mouth with the front of shirt when he saw it: a tuft a brown hair bouncing about on the other side of his shrubs. At first he thought he was seeing things, perhaps a blurry

scorch of light mutated by some leftover tears. He rubbed his eyes hard with the front of his shirt. When he looked out the window again, there was no mistake; the tuft of brown hair was real, and it was scampering around less than fifteen feet from his window.

Confusion married panic, and Butch understood what was happening. *Oh, God, he's back!*, Butch thought, his mind racing around in an incoherent frenzy. *That son of a bitch is back!* His heart took off, tears rushed back to his eyes. He stood up quickly and stumbled backward, spilling onto the sofa. From where he was sprawled, he had a clear view out the window. The hair was still loitering outside on the gravel road just beyond his property. Butch started massaging the palm of his hand with his thumb. He shook uncontrollably and rolled onto the dirty carpet. He took small steps towards the window. Snot dripped onto his shirt. "Not this time," he mumbled under deep sobs.

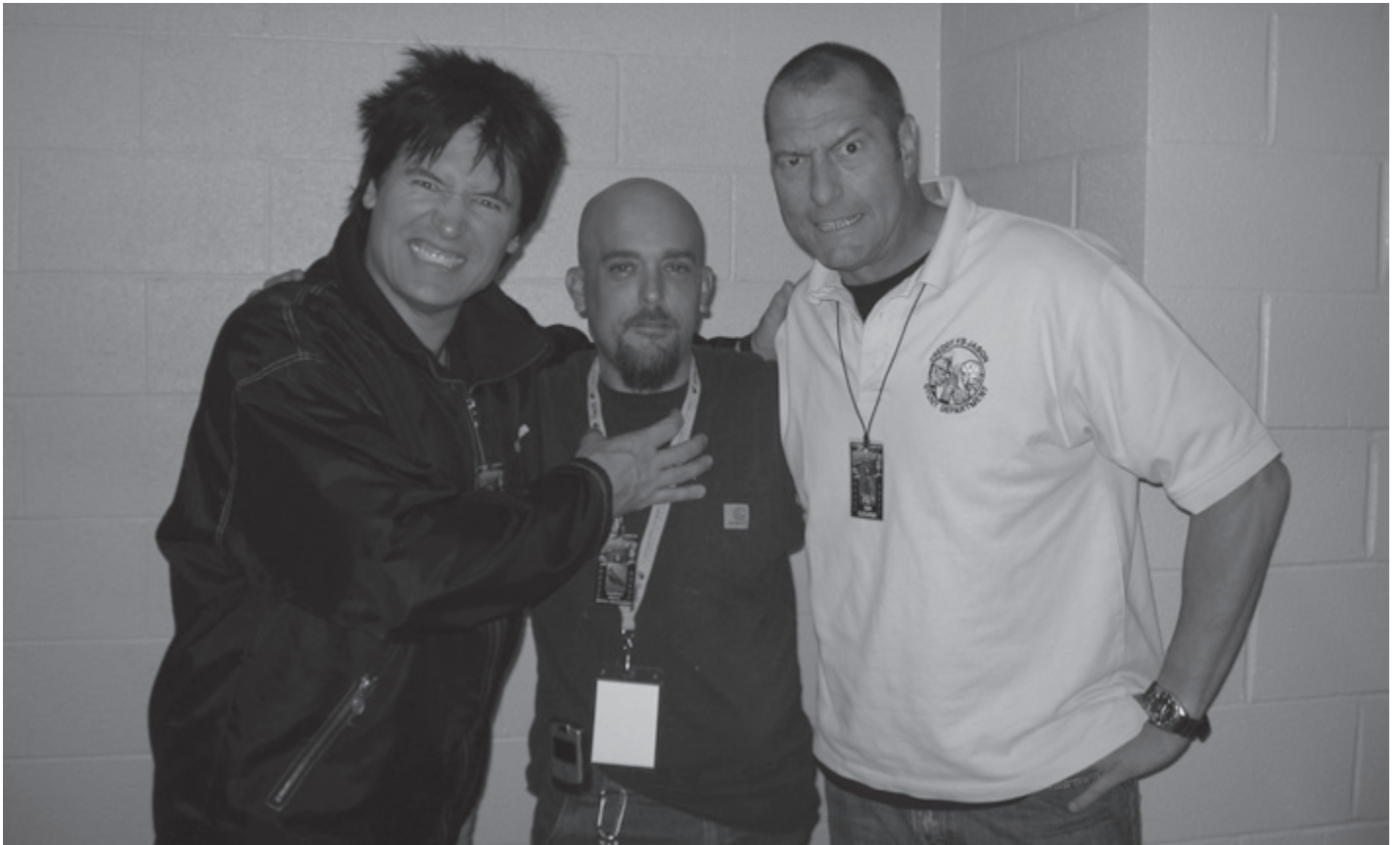
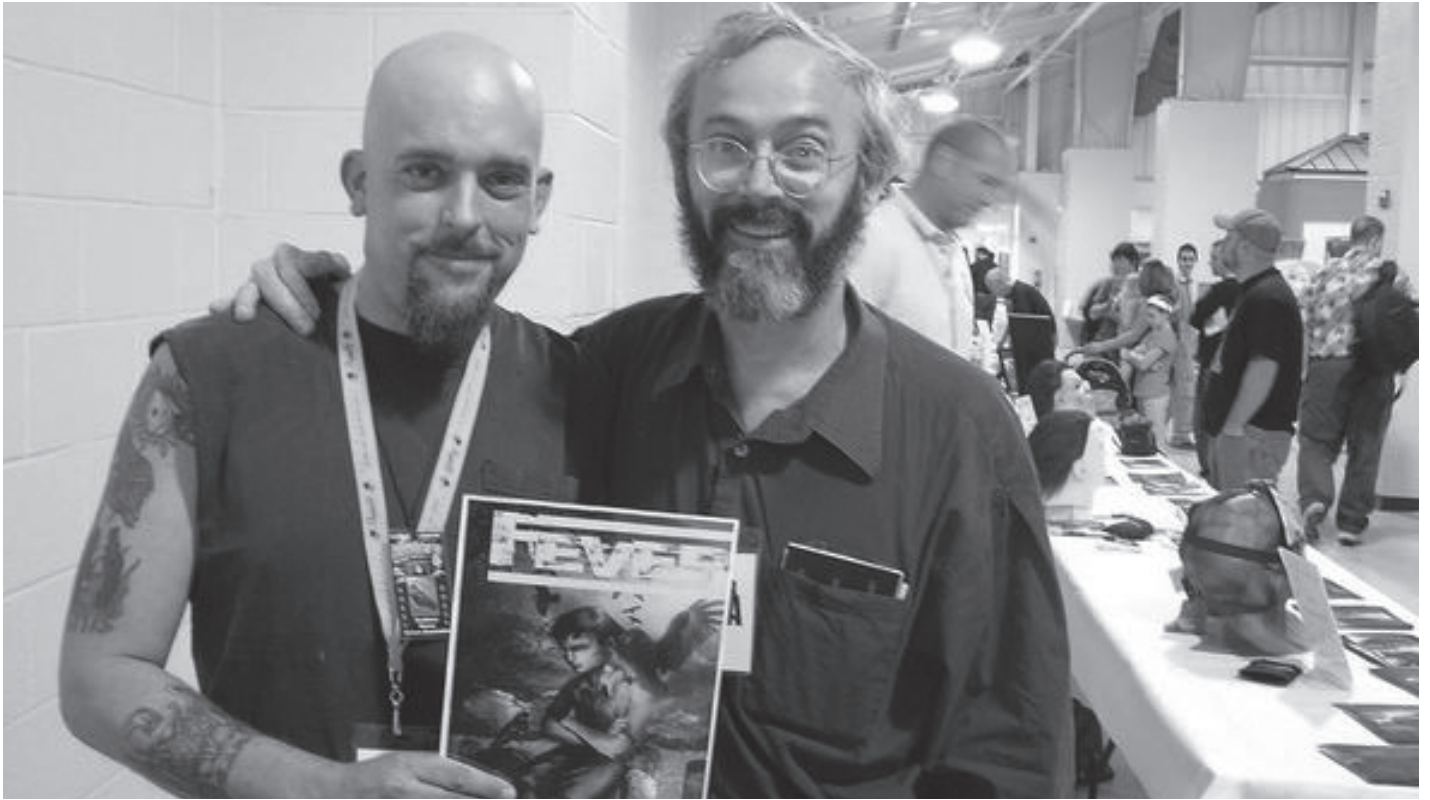
Butch left the room and returned with his shotgun. He got on his knees and moved cautiously to the window. He opened it with great care, put

the muzzle of the shotgun through the opening, and rested an elbow on the sill. He quieted his breathing, waiting patiently for any sign of movement. The crop of hair reappeared behind the shrubs where the driveway began. Sweat burned Butch's eyes. He blinked rapidly, his finger tapping the trigger. A hand emerged from the side of the bushes, then a sneaker, and before Butch could reconsider, the shotgun fired with a deafening blast that echoed throughout the house and sent birds scattering from nearby trees.

Butch ran outside, gripping the shotgun. His bare feet moved over trim grass, still damp with morning dew. He reached the driveway, turned around sharply, and went back inside.

Butch spent the better part of that morning locked in his bathroom, the grainy scope of what he'd done slowly coming into focus. What was left of the Boy Scout had rearranged the cables in his brain beyond untangling. Had he noticed the boy's walkathon sponsorship clipboard before it was swallowed by the growing pool of blood, he would have recognized the name on the top sheet, scrawled in pencil: John Andrews, Jr.





Interview: John Parker of POST MORTEM COMIC STUDIOS

BY EMMANUEL PAIGE



Post Mortem Comic Studios, based out of western North Carolina, is launching a series of independent horror comics, joining stories and authors from the Southern Horror Writers Association with talented artists spanning the world.

John Parker, the Owner of Post Mortem Studios, is the head of the Southern Horror Writers Association, a screenplay and fiction writer and artist. He is the creator of the comics: Fever, Ink, The Cursed and the Damned, Dorothy Rising, and The Magic Eight Ball. Parker has been vigorously promoting and building the foundation for Post Mortem Comic Studios for the past year and he is excited by the new trends and changes in the comic book industry.

Parker has teamed up with Scott Nicholson, a novelist famous for writing supernatural thrillers set in the seminal Southern Appalachians.

“I used to make comic books as a kid,” said Nicholson,

“fold up the paper and make the panels and drawings. I was always creative and enjoyed that type of escape into my imagination. I guess I just never grew up.”

Parker has also joined forces with Clayton Murwin, a freelance comic artist located in Charlottesville, VA, called: The Untold Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a project to raise money for disabled soldiers who have served their country in Iraq and Afghanistan. The graphic novel will be going to print sometime in June. This is a collaborative effort with artists from Indy comics, Marvel, Image and DC working on it together.

Post Mortem Comics Studios currently has a talented team of artists: David Magitis, Kewber, Justin Braden, Michael Harris, Derek and Nikki Davis, Clayton Murwin, Rich Cunningham and Tony Savage. They are always looking to expand their artist roster and add bold new horror titles to their lineup. Additionally, they also would like to form a network with other independent studios and comic book stores for cross-promotion and

distribution.

The initial release for titles from Post Mortem Comic Studios is set for May 1, 2009. You can visit the PMCS website, www.postmortemcomics.com, and order copies now.



Macabre Cadaver: What is Post Mortem Comic Studios?

John Parker: Post Mortem Comic Studios is a horror genre based horror comic book press, based out of Canton, NC. Our writers for the comic book company are active members of the Southern Horror Writers Association. We are dedicated to bringing horror back into the main stream public eye. Also to give younger horror writers a chance to get some of their work published in some fashion or form.

MC: Tell us a little about yourself, John Parker, on and off the clock.

JP: Well I am 35 years old. I pursued music as a career for about 20 years; playing death metal and black metal. After I settled down and got married I went back to something I have always loved (HORROR). I have written 6 screenplays, tons of short stories and scripting 11 different comic books of Post Mortem Comic Studios. I am the owner of Post Mortem Comic Studios and the President of the Southern Horror Writers Association. Not much else to me . . . I am horror and business 100% of the time.

MC: What inspired you to start Post Mortem Comics Studios?

JP: I have always been a huge comic book fan. Not so much as the super hero comics but, the old Tales from the Crypt stuff, Judge Dredd and The Punisher. I have also always had a comic book style to my artwork. After founding the Southern Horror Writers Association back in 2007 I decided to take my work a different route than just novels and novellas. My screenplays were what drove

me to do what I do and I decided to turn some of those screenplays into comics. At that point I pulled Scott Nicholson aboard with me along with Ben Larken; both officers of the association.

MC: What is your favorite comic book and/or character?

JP: My fav. is split between Judge Dredd and The Punisher.

MC: Your comics deal with horror and the macabre. This is exciting to see graphic horror comics coming back. Are we seeing a resurgence in comics that will rival "Tales from the Crypt" and any of the darker themed comics from Marvel?

JP: Our comics will pass Tales from the Crypt and the darker stuff of Marvel. Scott's titles lean more towards the Tales from the Dark comics and mine well let's say go towards Clive Barkers dark side and beyond. Some of the material will be 18 and up based stuff. Dipping down into harder hitting subjects and more satanic roots.

MC: How does an artist or writer go about submitting work for consideration in your comics? Do you accept unsolicited material?

JP: Yes we accept unsolicited material. We are always looking for up and coming writers and artists. I have always strived to help the underdog. The only condition is to be able to meet deadlines and to have crisp clean work. Any artist or writer can submit to us any time by emailing either me at johnparker@southernhorror.com or Scott Nicholson at hauntedcomputer@yahoo.com. We will gladly look over anyone's work and take it into consideration.

MC: I was introduced to you through Scott Nicholson. We did an interview with him back in September 2008. He is a really nice guy, and a great writer. What's it like working with a writer of his caliber?

JP: It is outstanding working with Scott. Scott is one of the nicest guys in the industry. His long term knowledge of the horror genre helps out

time after time. Also his editing skills are top notch. I wouldn't think of having anyone else as a partner in this venture.

MC: *There seems to be some unrest in the publishing industry due to the economy. Does the "economic crisis" scare you as a new startup company?*

JP: Not at all. In times of depression where does the public turn to, to take their minds off their own troubles. They look more towards the horror, thriller and action genres. It lets them see others in trouble worse than they are and takes the edge off their lives for a few short moments. Also horror is always there. People love to be scared.

MC: *Do you think the economy will damage sales for comics, magazines, and other periodicals?*

JP: I think that people are staying home more now. TV, books, comics and magazines will go on the rise. People aren't traveling as much as they use to. So in some ways maybe, but I think you will see an increase in sales of periodicals again. People spend money no matter what. Picking up a book is cheaper than spending \$100 to go out and eat and to a movie.

MC: *Who would win in a dual between Eric Draven from "The Crow" and Johnny Blaze from "Ghost Rider?"*

JP: Tough one there . . . but, I would have to go with Johnny Blaze. . . .

MC: *I can't resist, how about Judge Dredd vs. The Punisher?*

JP: Judge Dredd hands down . . . he is the mother fuckin' law. Judge, jury and executioner. . . .

MC: *That's it. We're done. Anything else you would like to add?*

JP: Yeah, would like it if you could mention a few other things . . . Right now I am working on a project with Clayton Murwin called the Untold Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a project based on helping give money to the disabled

solders who have served their country in Iraq and Afghanistan. The graphic novel will be going to print sometime in June. We have guys from the Indy Comics, Marvel, Image and DC working on it together

Also would love to mention some of our artists . . . they are the guys behind the magic . . . for Post Mortem that is . . . David Magitis, Kewber, Justin Braden, Michael Harris, Derek and Nikki Davis, Clayton Murwin, Rich Cunningham and Tony Savage. These are some really talented guys and gals and it makes our lives a lot easier working with such a top notch crew.





The Cracker

BY PAUL JOHNSON-JOVANOVIC

ILLUSTRATION BY IVAN McCANN

JACK EXAMINED THE FIRST BODY. HE COULD SEE NO VISIBLE SIGNS OF INJURY ON THE OLD MAN'S WIZENED TORSO. PROBABLY A HEART ATTACK, HE CONCLUDED. AND JUDGING BY THE SERENE LOOK IN THE GUY'S BLOOD SHOT EYES, JACK FIGURED THAT HE HAD PROBABLY BEEN READY TO GO.

JACK SAT IN HIS CAR WITH THE ENGINE RUNNING. He had the heated blowers on full blast. The short journey to the pub had only taken ten minutes, so the car's interior was only just beginning to warm up. He cupped his hands together and blew into them.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lit one. The embers burned brightly as he took a deep drag. He wound the window down slightly and blew the smoke out into the cold November night.

Droplets of rain drifted lazily on the breeze like the finest slivers of glass. The weather reports had promised a heavy fall. For the sake of his own safety, Jack hoped that they were wrong.

Looking around, he could see that it was a little busier than usual. The car park was about half full. Hot pistons cooled under a multitude of bonnets, metal contracting, waiting for their over-the-limit owners to return; the short journey back into town was deemed a worthwhile risk for most of the Wandering Whisperer's guzzlers.

As Jack took another deep drag of his cigarette, he noticed the woman. Hunched over, making her way towards the entrance, she scurried along, her heels clip-clopping as she went. He didn't recognize her; she certainly wasn't a regular. She opened the door and slipped inside.

Jack looked at the radio's green digital clock: 9:55pm. Deciding

that he was wasting valuable drinking time, he killed the engine, got out of the car and locked it. He took one final drag of the cigarette, then tossed it away. Making his way towards the pub, he puffed his jacket collar up and shivered.

He opened the door and entered, the warmth like a pleasurable slap in the face. His eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the low-lit setting, the long mirror behind the bar throwing back hazy shades of deep red from the lights suspended above it; like a Sahara sunset spreading out across the scuffed wooden floorboards that many a patron had walked over the years, thirsty for their vice. The smell of the House Hotpot still lingered from the closed kitchen. Simply Red's *Holding Back the Years* was playing on a nearby jukebox. The place was a hive of chatter and laughter.

As Jack walked towards the bar, his heels tapping on the wooden floor, he cast an admiring glance around the place, which had been decorated since his last visit. Although he didn't like the new deep red colour scheme, thought that it made the place too dark, he gave the landlord the big thumbs up.

"You've decorated again, Tony," he said, plonking himself down on a barstool and taking in the rest of the pub. "It looks . . . nice."

"Thanks," replied Tony, wiping the bar with a towel as he approached, "it's the missus. She insisted. Says we should give the place a fresh new look every now and again. She reckons that red is warm and cosy. What do you reckon?"

"I think she's got a point," Jack said, lying.

Without even asking, Tony poured Jack a pint of his usual. While he was waiting, he looked around. He couldn't see anyone he knew, though. In the far corner, a couple of young lads were playing pool. One of them was bent over the table, lining up a shot. His lips were pursed together into a fine line. He feathered the cue quickly back and forth. He let rip, missed, then let out a tirade of f-words. The other lad let out a guffawing laugh, his pint slopping all over the floor.

Tony looked at Jack as he slid the pint towards him. Jack looked back, rolled his eyes. Bloody kids!

Jack pulled out a fiver, went to pay, but the landlord waved it away with a podgy hand.

"It's on the house, Jacky boy," he said.

"Thanks," Jack said, taking a sip and wiping froth from his upper lip. "You're a star!"

Tony grabbed the bar towel and went to have a "quiet word" with the lads.

It was then that Jack noticed the pretty brunette sitting at the end of the bar. He had forgotten about the woman he'd seen in the car park. She didn't have a drink yet; she was waiting to be served. Jack guessed she had gone to the toilet first, which would explain why he'd only just noticed her.

Even though she was wearing a knee-length blue coat, he tried to imagine what she might have on underneath—what kind of underwear would take her fancy? That's assuming she's got any on, he thought, a sly smile playing at the corner of his lips.

Jack was glad he'd ventured out tonight. Being stuck at home on his lonesome was depressing.

Rosemary, the part time barmaid, appeared from round the back, her blonde ponytail bobbing from side to side as she walked. Spotting the woman at the end of bar, she went to serve her.

Jack couldn't hear what the woman was ordering, so he watched with interest as Rosemary picked up a tumbler, put it under the whisky optic and pushed it up once . . . twice . . . three times—a treble. Then she brimmed it with lemonade.

The woman paid for her drink.

Since the Whisperer was some way out of town, Jack figured that she'd be driving. He hoped she would nurse the drink, make it last a while, but she didn't; she took a big gulp and sighed.

Deciding it was time to introduce himself, Jack walked over and sat on a stool next to her.

She took another big gulp of her drink.

"Hi," he said, "haven't seen you here before. New to the area, are you?" He inwardly cringed a little, cursed himself for not thinking about what he was going to say first. Is that the best you can do, he thought?

She looked at him, midnight blue eyes wide, as if she'd just snapped out of a daydream. For a second she didn't say anything and Jack thought she was going to tell him to bugger off. But then she smiled, little dimples forming in her cheeks. Jack loved dimples.

“Sorry,” she replied, “I was just . . . thinking. What did you say?”

“I just asked if you’re new to the area?”

“No. I live in the town. I’ve never been here before, though.” She looked around. “It’s a nice little pub. Your local, is it?”

“Yeah, s’ppose I could call it my local. I come in every now and again. Beats sitting at home on my own, that’s for sure.” He offered a hand. “My Name’s Jack. And you are . . . ?”

“Amanda,” she said, shaking hands. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

Jack was surprised by the smoothness of her skin.

He was also surprised by something else, too: she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. He wondered why? Maybe she’s taken it off, he speculated? Or maybe she isn’t married; maybe she’s just had a fall out with her boyfriend or something? Either way, he didn’t really care. She was fair game, married or not.

Bob Dylan’s *I Want You* was now playing on the jukebox. Jack thought that this was a very appropriate song—*very* appropriate, indeed.

“I like this song,” Amanda said, finishing off her drink with another big gulp. “It’s one of my favourites.”

Tony was back behind the bar. She gestured to him with the empty glass.

“A treble gin with lemonade, please,” she said.

Two trebles in a row! And mixing her drinks, too! Jack decided it was time to say something.

He leaned in close and said in a low voice, “Listen, maybe you should slow down a little, eh? That’s two trebles in row you’ve ordered. I take it you’re driving home?”

“I might be,” she replied indignantly.

Jack nodded towards a **Don’t Drink & Drive** sign behind the bar. “You’re not a regular drinker, are you? If you carry on drinking like you are, you’ll be lucky if you can walk, never mind drive. That one drink you’ve just had will have put you *way* over the limit, I can assure you.”

She didn’t answer. She paid for her drink, got up and walked away.

“Hey, look, I didn’t mean to offend. It’s just that . . .”

“Are you trying to scare my customers off, Jack?” Tony asked, leaning on the bar and tipping him a wink.

Amanda was now sat at a table on the other side of the room.

Nice one, Jack thought! You just blew it big time.

“Make sure you don’t serve her with anything stronger than a coke next time,” Jack said. “That’s the second treble she’s ordered, and she downed the first one like whisky’s going out of fashion.”

“She driving?”

“I’m pretty sure she is.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her, Jacky boy.” Tony watched Jack take a sip of his beer. “You’re hardly one to be giving out advice about drink driving, huh? Sat there, supping your pint.”

“I’m just having the one and then I’m switching to shandys,” Jack replied matter-of-factly.

“She’s a looker,” Tony said.

“She sure is,” Jack agreed. “A real Cracker.”

They both looked at her. She sipped her drink and stared blankly out the window. To Jack, she seemed distant, as if something was deeply troubling her. He was at least glad that she was now just sipping instead of gulping.

“Do you recognise her?” Jack asked.

Tony slowly shook his head, scratched his stubbly chin. “I ain’t seen her round the town. Maybe she’s new to the area, or maybe . . .” He noticed the way Jack was looking at the woman. “Oh, you’ve got a bit of a soft spot for her, huh?” He chuckled. “She’s way out of your league, pal.”

“Probably,” Jack conceded, sipping his pint.

“Definitely,” Tony assured him.

In the far corner, over by the pool table, an argument had broken out. Some old fella was having a go at the two lads, telling them they were hogging the table, saying that he’d put a pound down an hour ago and still hadn’t had a bloody game. One of the lads told him to piss off. Tony had heard enough.

“Back in a tick,” he said, storming off.

Jack looked at Amanda, and was surprised to see she was looking back at him. He smiled. She smiled back. She raised her glass to him, then took a sip. Out of my league is she, he thought. I’ll show you, Tony.

Before he could have a second crack at her though, he needed the toilet. He took another quick sip of his beer, then made his way to the gents. Whilst the one-eyed snake was spitting out its venom, he tried to think of what he was going to say, how he was going to approach the situation. Don't mention the drink, he told himself . . . unless you have to. Try and think of something witty to say, something that'll make her laugh. For God's sake, she looks like she needs brightening up.

But when he went back into the bar she was gone, an empty tumbler left on the table where she'd been sitting. He cursed himself for not being able to hold his bladder.

Tony was back behind the bar.

"Where did she go?" Jack asked him.

Tony shrugged. "I didn't see her leave; I was too busy sorting out those lads. Maybe she's in the toilet. She's probably gone home, Jacky boy."

"Shit!"

Jack made his way outside, and was just in time to see the rear lights of a car disappear out of the car park. He couldn't know that it was her for certain, but deep down he *knew* it was.

It was raining heavily now, pounding the tarmac. He was surprised at the amount of surface water there was. He just hoped that Amanda would take her time and drive carefully.

From behind him came a roar of laughter.

Jack sighed deeply, then went back inside.

The following day, Jack was up early for work. Looking out of his apartment window, he was surprised to see that it was still raining. The town must be flooded by now, he thought.

As he got dressed and freshened himself up, his thoughts were of Amanda. He wondered if she had made it home safely? And if he would ever see her again, perhaps around the town? Or whether she would ever venture into the *Wandering Whisperer* when he was there?

Driving to work was treacherous. The roads were indeed flooded. Taking it slowly, he turned up for work fifteen minutes late. Better late than never.

He had been expecting a busy day. One of his co-workers informed him that there had

been nine new admissions over night. Jack wasn't surprised, given the terrible driving conditions. He was going to be working late that night at the Morgue, that was for sure.

All the bodies were laid out in a long line, white sheets covering them from head to foot. Moving along the trolleys, he pulled the covers back. Having seen all manner of injuries over the years, he had become accustomed to seeing things that would turn most people's stomachs inside out.

Jack examined the first body. He could see no visible signs of injury on the old man's wizened torso. Probably a heart attack, he concluded. And judging by the serene look in the guy's blood shot eyes, Jack figured that he had probably been ready to go.

He examined the second body. Estimating the young man before him to have been in his late teens, Jack checked him for any signs of a fatal injury. There was a two-inch, scabbed over puncture mark just below the rib cage. Jack knew a knife wound when he saw one.

It came as no surprise when he pulled back the third cover and revealed Amanda's body; but a cold chill still crept up his spine nonetheless, the fine hairs on the back of his neck standing erect. Despite the injuries she had sustained, she still looked beautiful to Jack. The missing eyeball and slivers of glass embedded into her skin didn't put him off.

He pulled the cover completely back and admired her pallid, firm, young body. Leaning in close, his shoes squeaking on the white-tiled floor, he took a deep breath of formaldehyde and kissed her sweetly on the lips.

Hearing the sound of approaching voices, he quickly pulled the cover back over her.

Just before he left the room, he whispered, "I'll be back later, my sweet . . . after everyone else has gone."



In Review: "Sirens", the new EP by Lady Parasyte

BY JEFF WOODWARD



an almost industrial/techno upbeat that keeps the heart pumping. *The Decadence* is just one example of how an artist can take a looped wave sound, and a deep bass line, mix it up with well thought out lyrics, and turn it into a great song.

Being a fan of EMB/techno genre, and also being from the Chicago area, the self-proclaimed "home" of house music, I am usually very critical when it comes to artists trying to hock their basement made tracks in every Chicago area music shop within a fifty mile radius of the Loop. Lady Parasyte transcends that stereotype. You could tell the time was spent on creating an excellent EP, the sound is great and professionally made, and above all else, the lyrics are put together well. We're not talking about your typical club

lyrics, meaningless and void of any thought provoking subjects; we are talking about well thought out lyrical combinations that leave the listener doing that; actually listening. It might be a long shot, but in a way, Lady Parasyte reminds me of a younger Trent Reznor, mixing solid music with lyrics that came from the heart. To sing these lyrics, Lady Parasyte uses vocals that are soothingly cool in some songs, to overtly guttural growls, like in *Are you Dead Yet?*

Sirens is an excellent and well put together EP. Lady Parasyte is on the rise, and it's only a matter of time before she's picked up by a big label. Grab the EP while you still have time to brag to your friends, "I heard of her first!"

Sirens is available now, and can be purchased at www.ladyparasyte.com. For more information about upcoming club dates and about Lady Parasyte herself, visit www.myspace.com/ladyparasyte.





The Phantom of Croglin Grange

BY NORMAN A. RUBIN

ILLUSTRATION BY IVAN McCANN

THE SOFT
MOANING AND
RUSTLING SOUND
GAVE WAY TO ONE OF
CHIPPING, AND SHE
REALIZED THAT THE
CREATURE'S BRUTISH
HANDS WERE TRYING
TO REMOVE THE SOFT
METAL AROUND THE
LEADED WINDOW.
FIRST ONE, THEN
ANOTHER OF THE
SMALL GLASS PANELS
GAVE WAY, FELL, AND
SHATTERED TO THE
FLOOR.

WELCOME MY GOOD FRIENDS, welcome to my home. You have heeded my invitation, for which I am truly thankful: you have come to my humble home to hear a tale of mystery and of evil surrounding the Croglin Grange, a tale told many times through the years. True, 'tis be! Now sit by the fire at the hearth to take the chill from your bones. Come! That's it! Now make yourselves comfortable, tea and cake will be along soon. Now listen carefully to my words as I spin the tale of the Phantom of Croglin Grange. Come closer—don't be frightened . . .

Before I begin I would like to give you a background to this well-known legend of the queen's realm. Croglin Grange, now in ruins, was low stone house with sloping slated roof over five rooms overlooking a hillock in a valley: it had a terrace from which large grounds that ran towards the hollow with its churchyard and its repository of the dead. It also had a fine view of the harbor. Legend relates that it was the property of the Fisher family for many long years, but in the late nineteenth century the head of the family found the property quite small for his growing family. With that in mind he decided to build a larger home for his family in a different district and put up the Croglin Grange for leasehold.

Two cold winters the stone house stood empty with only the shadows released during the twilight hours that gathered and mustered like visions of ghostly images. As the cold of the winter passed into

the warmth of the spring season, the Grange was finally let to two brothers and a sister with family name of Cranwells. The house was suited to their needs and comfort and soon they fitted into the life of the village; they were well liked by the villagers who considered them a happy and contented trio. But, unknown to all, their family was disfavored by the court, their lands were confiscated and they were driven into exile; Father Death reaped the soul of the head of the family and only the heirs remained.

Then, one summer evening when it was just so dark, as the form of things, were indistinct and rather large in stature—but not wholly lost to sight - an ominous aura enveloped the whole surroundings. Miss Cranwells feeling a bit tired, took to bed early and left the company of her brothers and retired to her bedchamber. After she was attired for her restful sleep she paused for a moment to look out through the leaded window; as she looked towards the direction of the darkened graveyard something caught her sight that brought a tinge of anxiety. Through the murky gloom of the night she could see two pinpoint lights. She watched as the two dots of lights moved over the shadows of the wall to the lawn of her house and then fading into the gloom. With unease in her soul, Miss Cranwells secured the two sides of the leaded window properly, bolted the door to the bedroom and laid down to her bed and tried to get some sleep.



I beg your forgiveness for interrupting my tale, but I feel there is a bit of chill in room. Be patient as I throw a log or two upon the fire and stoke it.

Ahh, that's better! Now let me commence with my tale . . .



After a while Miss Cranwells reviewed the situation and put it down to a figment of her imagination. With this in mind she drifted off to a restful slumber. But, on the verge of falling asleep she was jolted awake by a low moaning and a rustling sound coming from outside the window. She sat

upright in her bed, and to her horror, when she looked towards the window she saw two points of light burning like fiery coals. She tried to issue a scream but no vocal sound was rendered, as the terror gripped her very soul leaving her speechless.

The soft moaning and rustling sound gave way to one of chipping, and she realized that the creature's brutish hands were trying to remove the soft metal around the leaded window. First one, then another of the small glass panels gave way, fell, and shattered to the floor. Miss Cranwells was horrified to see a hairy claw reach inside and pulled the latch. The window swung inwards very slowly, and a terrifying figure climbed into the bedroom, whispering hoarsely from the depth of his throat, "Clarissa, Clarissa . . ."

Miss Cranwells could hardly speak let alone scream, when before her stood a semblance of a towering man, indefinably ferocious, with strings of hair like tangled weeds about his face. The black attired figure stood near the bed and then, with snarled hands pulled her head back roughly and gave her a biting kiss on the back of her neck. The shock of seeing the figure pulling back with his full lips dripping blood caused her to scream with the sound coming deep from her throat.

The brothers, asleep in their separate rooms, heard the high pitched scream of terror that echoed throughout the Grange. In an instant they were aroused and were at their sister's room. But, to their consternation to all their shouting the door was locked, and there was no answer. Then with the aid of a poker, they succeeded in forcing the door. Upon entering they felt a moldering decay smell all about, and their sister was lying upon her bed with blood flowing from a gash upon her neck. One of the brothers rushed to the open window and caught sight of a darkened figure rushing on the lawn towards the churchyard. The second brother, in the meantime, managed to staunch the blood flow on his sister's wounds and tried to revive her.

Miss Cranwells survived the attack and its shock, and within a short period of time she was able to relay to her brothers about the attack of that strange monster, one that whispered the name Clarissa. The brothers then swore revenge

on that ferocious creature whose identity was not known.

The wound healed, and she appeared to be getting better in health, but the doctor who attended her advised that she should go to the quiet of the Swiss Alps to a peaceful inn, where she could recuperate fully. Being a sensible woman, she agreed and went abroad where she occupied herself in taking refreshing walks, did a bit sketching, enjoyed the vigors of mountain climbing and chatting with new found friends. As the autumn season neared, she decided to return to her brothers and Croglin Grange.

The autumn season passed most peacefully and happily. Then in the following winter month of December when the land was cold and dark, the sister was awakened by a sound she remembered too well—scratch, scratch, scratch sounds upon the window. She heard again the soft moaning and picking sound. Looking up, she saw the same hideous shriveled face with glaring eyes looking at her and then saw the hideous claw push out a pane of glass and to reach the latch. As the foul creature opened the window and tried to enter the room she let out a high pitched scream and almost immediately her two brothers entered the room with loaded pistols. When the foul creature managed to enter the bedroom they both loosed off shots at the creature who howled in pain and in an instant jumped out of the window. The brothers watched as the creature once again ran, or rather limped to the churchyard. They were reluctant to follow the creature in the hours of darkness and the two brothers waited for daybreak.

The first thing upon the breaking of dawn the brothers took their sister to the safety of one of the village folk. Then they mustered a few brave lads of the village to carry out their gruesome task of the finding the foul creature.

The men took the route the terrifying figure took during the gloom of the night when he ran to the churchyard. There they searched the cemetery for any sign of disturbance to the graves or to their grave stones. Finding nothing, they turned their attention to a nearby ornate crypt, and they noticed the heavy door was slightly ajar. Pushing into the large crypt, they were met with a horrific

scene. The vault was full of coffins; they had been broken into and their contents horribly mangled and distorted. All around on the stone floor were gnawed human bones scattered about. Only one aged coffin placed in a corner was seemingly untouched by the chaos that abounded. The villagers watched as the brothers wretched off the coffin lid and to their horror they saw a hideous vampire wrapped in moldy clothes, brown and withered, shriveled and mummified and with blood red lips. It was the same foul creature that looked into the window and nearly attacked poor Miss Cranwells. Its eyes were cold upon its grim and haggard face, but a fresh pistol wound was gaping from one of the creature's legs.

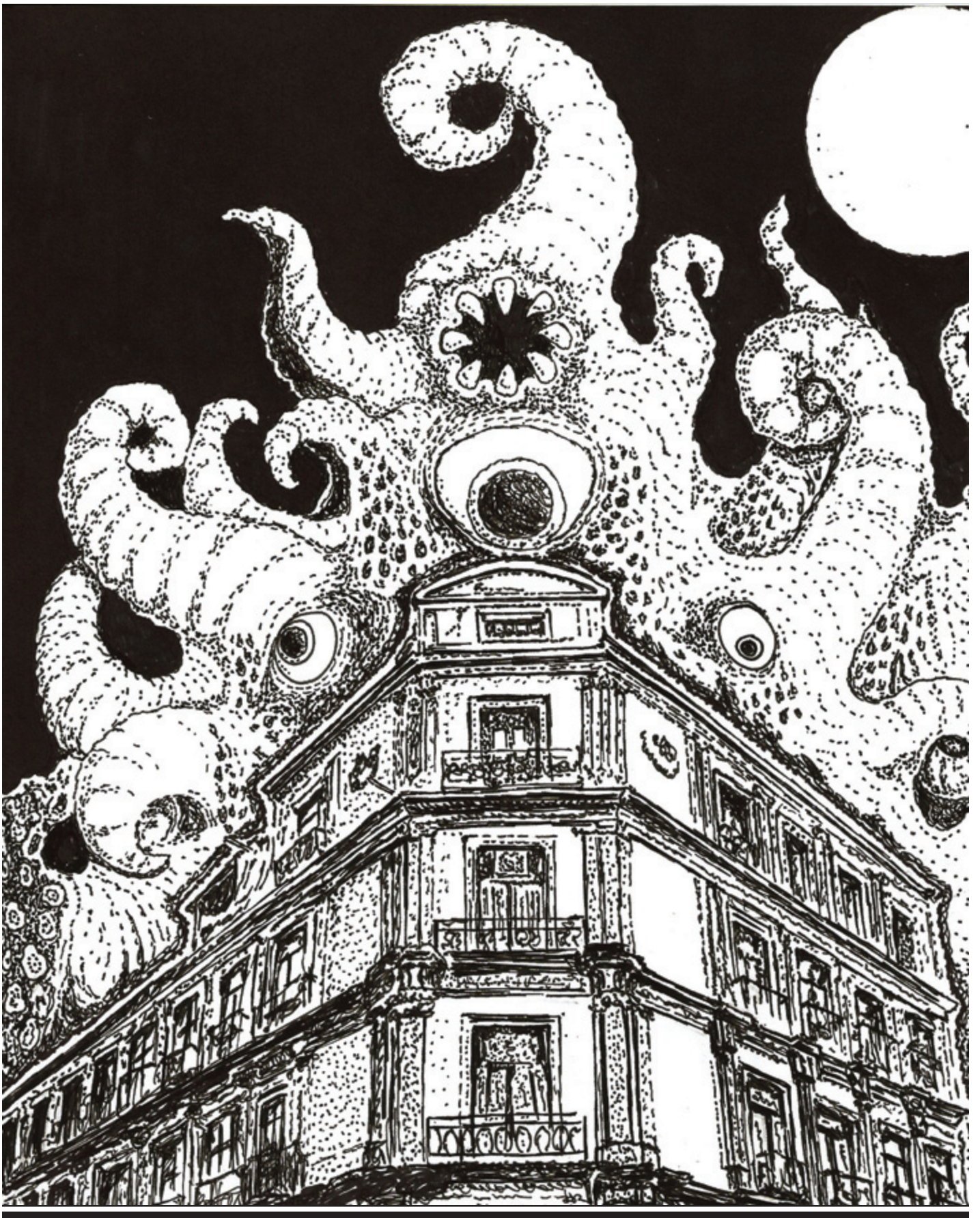
The brothers, with aid of the village lads carried the coffin outside upon the graveyard, and then with due ceremony, drove a stake into the vampire's heart to kill its soul. Then a match was lit and applied to the coffin and its grizzly contents. All watched as the fire burned the coffin and the foulness within to a fine ash.

Nobody ever knew were this terrifying creature came from and had remained dormant for years during the past ownership of the Grange—a mystery to this very day... Yet legend has it that the figure was a brave knight who wooed his beloved Clarissa, daughter of the past owners of the Grange, but was looked upon with jealousy by a wizard who also admired her. Then through a devilish potion he turned the suitor into a vampire to roam endlessly through the years in pursuit of his beloved. And, through his dim eyes, he thought he found her . . .

✠ ✠ ✠

Ahh, I see the hour is getting late and it is time to bid you all farewell. Just be a bit careful and watch you step when you walk the paths to your home in the dark of night. Good evening my good and attentive friends. Pleasant dreams. . . .





It Hungers

BY BENJAMIN GREEN

ILLUSTRATION IVAN McCANN

DOORS ON
EITHER SIDE OF HIM
LOOKED LIKE THEY
HAD BEEN DRAWN
BY CHILDREN,
RUDE PARODIES OF
RECTANGULARITY.
BEHIND THEM, HE
HEARD STRANGE
SOUNDS. LAUGHTER,
GIBBERING, SNARLS,
GROWLS, AND A
CACOPHONY OF LESS
PLEASANT SOUNDS.

SECURITY OFFICER STEPHEN HICKS was so bored that he could scream. He knew that hotel gigs were bad, but he needed the hours. His last couple of paychecks had been anemic, and the bills were piling up. Still, this had to be one of the worst sites he'd been on. And he'd been on some bad ones.

Allied Security picked up some awful temporary sites. He had spent fourteen hours guarding scaffolding for a condo in the U-District. He wasn't supposed to bring anything on-site, and he had to use the bathroom in a nearby gas station.

A lot of it depended on the attitude of the client. Some had unrealistic expectations, and did their utmost to make the poor officer's life miserable. A few let the guards do pretty much whatever they wanted. Most fell into a spectrum in between.

The four star hotels tended to be toward the hard-nosed end. Hicks could understand having a guard lounging around in the lobby looked real bad. Of course, a lot of them were good about keeping their guards busy.

He glanced at his watch, and suppressed a groan. It was fifteen minutes to his next rove. That was one of the things that made this site such a pain. This had been a last-minute call-in. He got the call offering the job only three hours before it began.

That meant he had no ideas what the expectations were going in.

Plus, there was no transport waiting when he got to the security office, which meant he would have to take his chances in the neighborhood.

The hotel was in upper downtown, over by the Convention Center. So finding on-street parking was hopeless. He decided to take his chances parking in the hotel lot. Not a good way to start a shift.

Once he got into the hotel lobby, he was informed that he was to leave his stuff behind the hotel counter. Nothing unusual about that. Then they dropped the bomb on him. He was to sit in the lobby between roves, and just watch.

Roves were every forty-five minutes, and if he stretched, he could make them last for half an hour. The problem was the hotel gave him the heebie-jeebies.

He tried telling himself it was just the late hour, and a childish fear of the dark. He knew that the three o'clock hour cast everything in new and sinister light. Still, something about this place set his hackles on edge. He knew he was being silly, but that didn't change the way he felt.

A field supervisor had been promised to arrive within the hour. They would do a walk-through together, and the field supervisor would show him all the little housekeeping chores that were part of the site expectations.

Not that he ever intended to come back. Anything was better than this. Well, *almost* anything.

S/O Hicks sat on the couch in the lobby, staring out the glass windows. That was one good thing about this site. They didn't expect you to stand the entire time. Then again, that was probably the only good thing he could say for this site.

The halls had been denuded of all reading material, lest the security guards be tempted. All he could do was stare out the window at Pike Street. And at this time of the night, the city was as close to dead as it ever got. A car or two might venture by, but that was the extent of the entertainment.

He felt an overwhelming desire to look at his watch, and began counting in his head. The urge continued to nag and nag at him, like an itch he couldn't scratch. He tried singing songs in his head, but the desire would not be put off.

He knew he would give in at some point. The

trick was to hold off for as long as possible. How much longer that would be was an open question.

It felt like there was sand in his clothes, grating against his skin. It wouldn't be long now. His hands trembled with repressed desire. He gave in, and looked at his watch.

It said six to three. Giving a mental shrug, he decided that it was close enough. If he was lucky, the field supervisor would be waiting for him in the lobby when he finished this rove. Of course, that was as likely as him winning the Lotto. Since he didn't buy tickets, it was a very low order of probability.

He pushed the button for the elevator, and waited for it to slide open. Like most luxury hotels, this place had extra-slow elevators. It would have been quicker to walk, but he didn't want to kill himself going up those fourteen flights of stairs. So he waited and waited for an interminable period for the elevator to come.

When it did, he pushed the button for the top floor. This was the part he hated most. Each floor had a yellow and white striped wallpaper, lit at intervals by retro Gay Nineties light fixtures. They were supposed to look like oil lanterns, and threw enough light to create that illusion, casting pools of dim light in the darkness.

S/O Hicks steeled himself for the task ahead, and stepped out into the hallway. He cursed himself for not bringing his flashlight. Not that he needed it. He just felt secure with it in his hand.

He walked down the hallway, checking any doors that did not have room numbers on them. As usual, they were locked. Then he moved down to the next level.

One of the things about this place that gave him the creeps was that no two floors were laid out exactly the same. Each one had something that violated the pattern of the one above.

He also had the uneasy feeling the walls were shifting around on him. Of course, that was silly. That kind of thing was a cliché from the horror novels he liked to read. However, unease was hanging around him like an invisible cloak.

Another thing that bothered him about this place was the low lighting. At times, it looked like the wallpaper pattern was shimmering. That was

crazy, though. His eyes were playing tricks on him, weren't they?

Don't be so sure, an alien voice said inside his head. He gave it a shake. Maybe he was starting to crack up. When his shift was over, he was going to avail himself of the psychiatric services his medical benefits entitled him to.

He had checked four floors already, and he was starting to break out into a sweat. He took off his baseball cap, and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his sweater. That was when he thought he heard the whispering start.

Stephen stopped in mid-wipe, his eyes wide, and looking around. He couldn't see anybody, so he concluded he was also starting to hear things. Something else to bring up with the psychiatrist.

He reseated the baseball cap on his head, and went back to work. The voices didn't go away though. They continued following him down to the next floor, keeping up their conspiratorial whisper.

He also had the feeling of eyes on the back of his neck. It was impossible to gauge their intentions, but the likelihood was it was malicious.

He tried convincing himself that this was professional paranoia galloping away with him, and next hour, some of this foolishness should dissipate. An increasing sense that he wouldn't live to see the next hour was growing on him, though.

Logic and reason were slip-sliding away in the face of the growing insanity of the situation. He could try denying it all he wanted, but he was now in the belly of the beast.

A rising panic pulsed in his brain, threatening to drive everything else out. Just forget his car, forget this site, forget Allied, just run for his life. His last coherent thought was that it was already too late.

Then a blinding pain exploded between his eyes. It felt like a giant viselike hand had raped its way into his skull, and was crushing his brains. His hands flew to his temples, his knees came unhinged, and his mouth flopped open, to begin screaming in pain and panic.

However, despite being unsprung, his legs continued holding him up. No sound emerged from his mouth. The pain did not lessen, but he had an increasing feeling of disassociation from it.

There was a sense that the pain belonged to somebody else. His logical faculties remained intact, to record events. It was his emotions that were under heavy sedation as an unseen entity took control.

His body lurched forward, around the corner. The hallway elongated before him. There was now no doubt that the wall paper was rippling and pulsating. He was being drawn like a moth to a flame toward the door at the end of the hallway.

Doors on either side of him looked like they had been drawn by children, rude parodies of rectangularity. Behind them, he heard strange sounds. Laughter, gibbering, snarls, growls, and a cacophony of less pleasant sounds.

A glow was emanating from around the door, a sick reddish-orange glow. The word *deadlights* ricocheted around in his skull. His emotions began to wake from their lethargy. As if in response, his body began loping faster toward the doorway.

The logical mind recorded that the door was bulging out toward him, as if it were made of rubber, instead of wood. As he got closer, he could start seeing what was making those bulges.

Faces with wide-open, silently screaming mouths. Horny hands that ended in long, sharp talons. Squirming, writhing creatures with tridentical teeth. Images from his worst nightmares began flooding his brain.

His brain rebelled, trying to force the invisible invader out. Then the door flew open, and his sanity was destroyed at a clawing stroke. His throat unlocked at last, and he let out a long animalistic howl that was cut short by a wet ripping sound.

Archie Richards, the field supervisor, came sailing into the lobby around four-fifteen. He had been running late all evening, and he was not in a good mood. "Where is S/O Hicks?"

The clerk blinked a couple of times before answering. "Oh, he didn't return from his last rove."

Archie's jaw muscles twitched. Then he covered his eyes with his cupped palm. "Damnit! Not again!"

The clerk shrugged. "You know as well as I do that the hotel demands an occasional blood sac-

rifice. That was part of the contract. I think the hotel has showed remarkable restraint.”

Archie nodded. “Yes, yes, that’s true. Still, Mr. Fredrickson is going to climb up my ass about what his is going to cost him.”

The clerk shrugged. “I don’t see what the problem is. He’s making money hand over fist on the contract. Meanwhile, it’s us who are taking all the risks with the disposal detail.” He rolled his eyes. “This time, the hotel was good enough to leave the keys behind.”

“Fredrickson will worry himself sick that that the insurance rates will go up because the insurance company has to pay out of the company policy.”

The clerk waved his hand. “Not to worry. The cleanup crew is already at work abandoning the car in Renton, with the keys in the ignition. We’ll file a complaint that the guard never showed up. Everything will be fine.”



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Milk Jug Headshot Model

BY WILLIAM ANDRE SANDERS



*L*ONG EXPOSED WOUNDS pose thickly gelled;
Desiccated—stiff and tangled—scarlet stained blonde hair –
Overlays rigor mortis swelled, purple-tinted eyes,
Folded shut with crisp yellow sap between their slits –
On tattered rag doll, Dora Jane.
Oak spectators all around;
Their arms spread out with horrid awe.
Laid to wither less than bone,
A modern day Leonardo da Vinci type chef-d’-oeuvre.
Rancid Dora Jane . . . long rested;
Bowel-rot perfume dilutes a short-spread zephyr –
Surpassing a many of tongueless torso crowded all around,
Soundlessly astonished by esthetic beauty.
Displaced splendidly adorned,
A blonde haired makeshift Mona Lisa;
Unwitnessed, searched for, gave up on, and abandoned,
Posing mute in a gallery of woods unfounded.



Binnie

by Richard Smith

ILLUSTRATION BY EMMANUEL PAIGE

“YOU KNOW I
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WITH THIS, DON’T
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HIS FACE RIGHT UP
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CLOSE ENOUGH FOR
RUTH TO SMELL HE
HAD BEEN DRINKING.
“I COULD PIN YOU
RIGHT TO THE WALL.”

BINNIE HAD NO EYES.
Brett had ripped them out in a fit of rage, then thrown her
across the room.

He complained the rag doll stared at him. She freaked him out.

But Kirsty loved her. Kirsty was always holding the doll. Ruth
watched as she whispered to the sightless, smiling face. Poor child,
she thought. Ruth did her best, she fed and clothed her, she really
did try. But she could never get close to Kirsty. The girl doesn’t con-
fide in me, Ruth reflected.

She talked to Binnie.

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Ruth stared through the window. Brett was in the yard, skinning
the rabbit he’d trapped. He was demonstrating to Kirsty with his
hunting knife. Kirsty watched silently, holding Binnie close.

Ruth did not want to disturb them, but the meal was ready. Brett
would complain if it got cold. She opened the back door.

“You can’t be squeamish, not when you’re skinning,” Brett was
saying. He tossed a piece of bloody fur on the ground. “You got to
be tough about these things.”

“Kirsty, can you come in and wash your hands now?” Ruth called

from the doorway. Kirsty looked over and nodded.

Brett pointed the knife at Ruth. "I was teaching her," he said.

"She's only six," Ruth replied. "I think you forget sometimes. But anyway, your dinner is ready."

"I'll teach her what I want." Brett walked towards her. "She's my kid. She's got to learn sometime." He watched as Kirsty went past Ruth into the house.

"You know I could skin *you* with this, don't you?" he said, his voice low. He put his face right up close to her own. Close enough for Ruth to smell he had been drinking. "I could pin you right to the wall." He pointed the tip of the bloody blade close to her chest.

Ruth looked aside, away from the knife. She did not make eye contact or say anything. It was best not to provoke him in any way.

Kirsty had left Binnie outside when she came in. The doll was smiling, as usual.



"I know I don't treat you right," Brett said to her. "I know I could do better." He paced the kitchen floor, blowing cigarette smoke. "I've thought of a way to make it up to you."

Ruth stood in the corner of the kitchen, her arms folded against her chest. She wished he wouldn't smoke. Her face was pale. She looked tired. "You don't have to," she said, but she spoke to the floor.

"I want us to go away for the weekend. Just me and you. There are cabins up on the lake you can hire. We need to spend some time together—just the two of us."

They were never together any more. He would work most days at the store in town, then spend his evenings out in the garage, working on the car. At weekends he was usually hunting with his brother, or they were out drinking and gambling, and she didn't know what else.

"Where would Kirsty go?" she asked.

"She can stay with Mike. He said he'll have her, if it's just for a weekend. We talked about it."

"I don't think she'd like—"

"It's been arranged," Brett snapped, his voice rising. "For God's sake, she's going to Mike's. It might even do her some good."

"OK," Ruth said quietly.



It was the evening before the trip, and Kirsty had lost Binnie. Ruth was helping her look for the doll when they heard Brett tumble down the stairs. Ruth ran to the hall, the young girl following.

Brett had been carrying the suitcases, and had tripped. He did not appear to be seriously hurt, but his face was red and flushed with anger. "God damn it!" he shouted. He pulled Binnie out from under his legs as he rose to his feet, and thrust her accusingly at Kirsty. "What have I told you about leaving this fucking doll on the floor?"

Kirsty said nothing. She just stared at Brett with her large brown eyes.

"She didn't mean to," Ruth began. She flinched as Brett took the doll in both hands and ripped her in half, tossing the two pieces aside.

Brett's fists opened and closed. "Go to your room. Now!" he shouted at Kirsty. He slammed his palm against the wall.

Kirsty ran past him, climbing the stairs as fast as she could. Behind her, she heard Brett yelling at Ruth. There was another thud. It sounded like he had kicked the suitcase, but she couldn't be sure.



Later, Kirsty heard her door open, and she closed her eyes.

"Are you awake?" Ruth asked quietly. "I've got something for you." She offered her a mug of milk, which Kirsty took eagerly. "You didn't get your drink tonight, did you?"

Ruth waited while Kirsty drank the milk, then helped her put the mug on the bedside table. "I got something else, too." She lifted Binnie from her cardigan pocket. She had sewn her back together, and added new buttons for eyes. "I found your mom's sewing things," she explained. "It's not perfect, but—"

Kirsty hugged the doll tightly, a smile forming on her lips. "Thankyou," she said.

Ruth managed a weak smile in return, tears welling in her eyes. It was not supposed to be this way. Brett had been so charming when they had first met, the summer before last, when she had been just nineteen. How had it all gone wrong? She could see now that the charm had all been an act. He had wanted a mother for his child, and a wife for his bed. Any affection had long since faded. She knew she should leave him, but it was not that easy, she had nowhere to go, and besides, what would happen to Kirsty if she did?

"Where's Daddy?" Kirsty asked.

"It's OK, he's working on the car. Just keep Binnie away from him, until tomorrow. We're headed off in the morning, so long as he can fix it."

"I don't want you to go."

"I know, honey, but it won't be so bad." Ruth tugged at the sleeve of her blouse. "Y'know, he doesn't mean to lose his temper. He's really trying. This trip might make all the difference."

"Mommy says you have to be brave," Kirsty said earnestly, holding the doll next to her face.

"Do you mean Binnie, honey? Is Binnie talking to you?"

"Binnie and Mommy. They always talk to me. She says you have to run away, and take me with you. If you go away with Daddy, he'll kill you, just like he killed her."

Ruth was taken aback by Kirsty's words. She could not answer for a moment. "Honey, your mom died in an accident. Your Daddy would never do anything to . . . to hurt me . . . it's nice that you have Binnie, but you mustn't . . . you mustn't . . ." Ruth stopped, she had run out of words.

"Binnie says she likes you. You're nice, because you look after me. But you've got to run away now."

Ruth clasped her hands together. "We can't just run away, your Daddy wouldn't like that . . . besides, there's nowhere we could go." Ruth looked over to the window, then back to Kirsty. "That's enough talk now. He might be in soon, so I should get back downstairs . . . you just try and get some sleep."

Ruth kissed her forehead, then tucked her back

into the bed. Kirsty squeezed Binnie tight.



The following morning, Ruth had packed her case, and was making a final check on Kirsty's small bag, when she realised that Binnie had gone missing again. For a child who was so attached to her doll, Kirsty seemed to mislay her an awful lot, Ruth thought.

"Where did you leave her?" Ruth asked Kirsty as she came into the kitchen.

"I don't know," she replied. "She does this sometimes."

Brett was back in the garage, in a dark, brooding mood. The fuel tank was leaking, and he could not seem to fix it. Ruth knew they had to be ready to leave before he was finished.

Ruth looked in every place, but the rag doll was nowhere to be seen. Finally, she thought to check in Brett's suitcase. Binnie wasn't there, but she did notice something in the zipped compartment in the lid. For a moment she stared blankly at the contents, then, as the implications registered in her mind, her heart began to thud in her ribs and her hands began to shake.

A bed sheet. A length of cord.

Her savings account book.

His gun.

Ruth felt sick.



Brett scowled as he tried to isolate the leak in the fuel tank of the '52 Dodge Coronet. They were late already, and now he had gotten gasoline all over himself as he worked beneath the tank.

He reached for a rag to wipe his hands, and jumped when he saw the doll's face looking down at him. "God damn," he muttered under his breath. "Kirsty, if you're in here, get the hell out, and take that doll with you," he shouted.

The doll had been dropped next to his lighter and cigarettes. That was strange because he had not seen Kirsty come over.

"Thought I ripped you up," he muttered. He tossed the rag at the doll, but Binnie just stared with her new eyes.



Kirsty passed Ruth sitting next to the suitcases. Ruth looked paler than usual. Kirsty sat down next to her. "Don't worry," she said. "It will be OK."

Ruth looked up at her. "No it won't," she replied. She knew with terrible certainty what he planned to do. She had heard his drunken threats often enough.

I can make you disappear, do you know how easy it is to do that? I'll take your precious money, and no-one would miss you.

There was no phone on their property. The nearest neighbour was a mile away. Brett was with the car. She was trapped.

She began to cry.



Brett needed a cigarette. He reached for his lighter, but seeing the doll, right next to it, he stayed his hand. The thing freaked him out. Why the hell had Ruth mended it? He decided it was not a good idea to smoke after all, not with the Dodge leaking gas, and not while that face stared at him. He began sliding out from the pit beneath the car, his back against the floor. He would smoke later, but he would throw the doll outside now.

A shadow fell over him, and he looked around.

Kirsty leaned forward and cut his throat with the hunting knife in one clean, swift movement, just the way he had taught her. She stepped back as his blood spurted from the deep, gaping wound, careful not to get any on her shoes or dress. Brett's hands pressed desperately to his throat, trying to stem the bleeding, but the crimson fluid spilled between his fingers. He tried to sit up, but the car obstructed his movements. One hand left bloody prints on the side of the vehicle as he sought to get a grip on it.

Kirsty watched silently as he coughed and writhed, his movements becoming less urgent as his strength faded. She took another step back as the pool of blood around Brett spread towards her shoes.

Brett turned towards her, his eyes seeming to

bulge from his face, a look of shock and anger etched onto his features. Kirsty watched impassively until the struggling and choking finally ceased and his eyes stared vacantly, and there was just a low gurgling sound from deep in his throat.

Kirsty stepped past the blood, moving around until she stood over him. She knew a little about gasoline. She knew it was dangerous, and she knew Brett had it on his overalls. She picked up Binnie and held her close to her face. She listened to what Binnie had to say.

It would be sad, but she told herself she had to be tough. She took the lighter and held it under Binnie's toes. She turned the wheel, making the flame. Binnie's foot and then her leg caught alight.

Brett's eyes seemed to come awake at the sight of the flames. He made a low, rasping sound. Kirsty dropped the flaming rag doll onto his chest, watching as his overalls caught fire, the flames quickly spreading down his legs. She tossed the hunting knife down into the pit. Then she turned and walked out of the garage, closing the doors behind her.

Kirsty headed across the yard to the back door of the house. She had to wash her hands.



There were policemen by the ruined garage, taking pictures, making notes. The fire had started in the pit, spread to the fuel tank in the car, and the outbuilding had turned into a blazing furnace. The fire had raged until the heat had caused the roof to collapse. By the time the alarm had been raised and the firemen had arrived, there was little left. They had taken over an hour to quell the flames. The remains of the owner of the property had been found in the pit, beneath the blackened husk of the automobile. He would need to be formally identified by his dental records.

Ruth sat with Kirsty in the kitchen, stroking the girl's hair softly. Kirsty looked up at her. "Binnie was in there too."

Ruth said nothing. She did not know what to say.

She still could not comprehend what had hap-

pened. A terrible accident, the police had told her. Smoking in the proximity of flammable liquids, most likely. Kirsty had seen the flames from the kitchen and raised the alarm, but it was already too late, the fire had taken hold, they could not get near.

“Who will look after me now?” Kirsty asked.

“I will, honey,” Ruth replied, her voice hoarse. She meant it too. She would not let her go to Mike’s. Ruth pulled her tight, her eyes red and

damp. “And maybe, I don’t know . . . perhaps we can make a new Binnie.”

Kirsty was quiet for a moment or two. “No, Binnie’s gone now,” she said. “Maybe I could get a rabbit—as a pet, I mean.”

“OK, we’ll have to see. I don’t see why not.”

Kirsty smiled. She squeezed Ruth’s hand. “I think we’ll be good together. You’ll look after me, and I’ll be there to look after you too.”

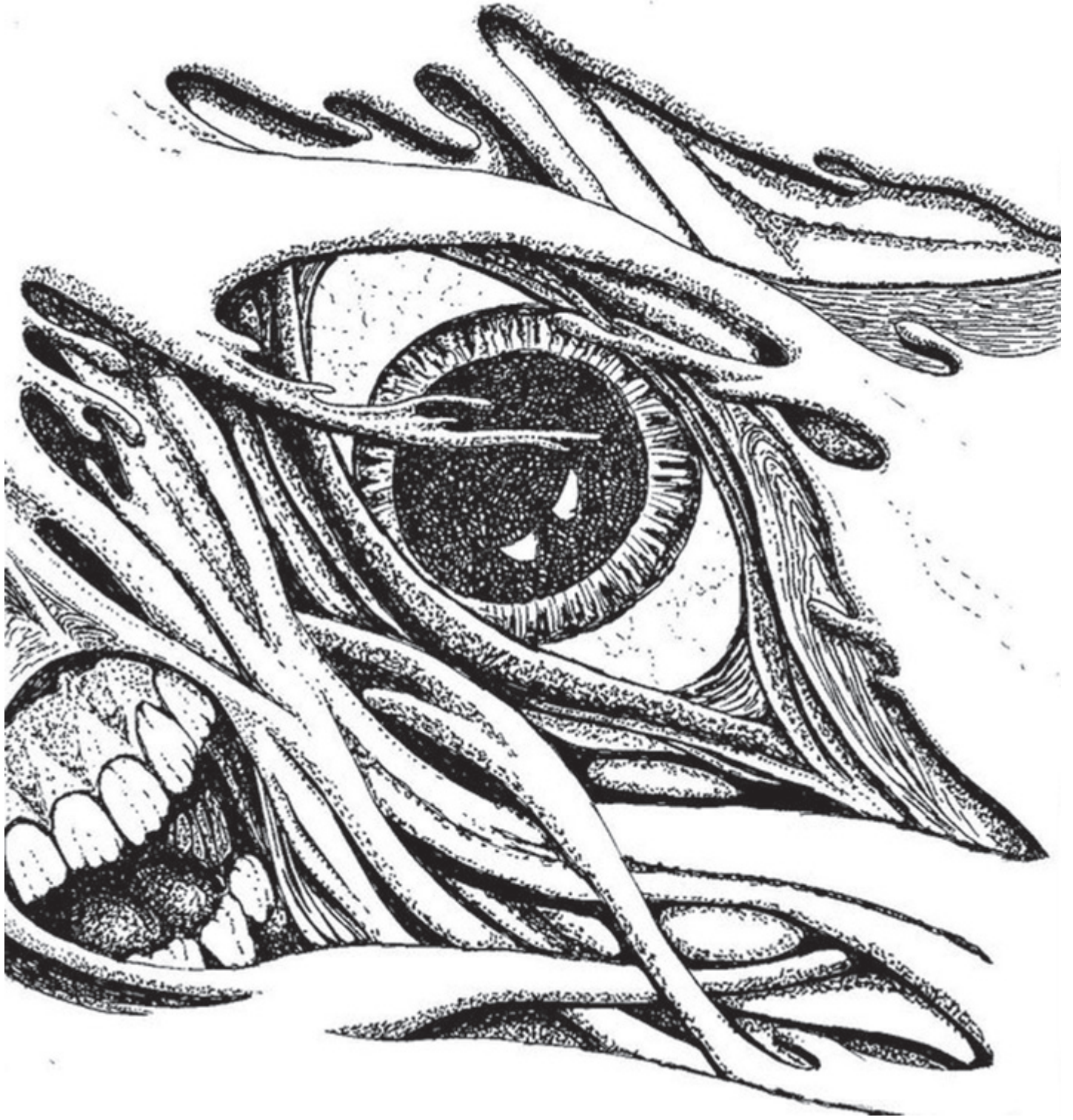
“That’s right, honey,” Ruth said.



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The Offering

BY NIGEL K. FELTON

ILLUSTRATION BY IVAN McCANN

A STRANGE
CHANTING BEGAN
AND I HEARD THE
SCUFFLING OF BARE
FEET AGAINST SOME
DIFFERENT SORT
OF FLOOR, WHICH
CREAKED AND
POPPED WITH EACH
STEP. HANDS BATHED
ME, STROKING ME,
GLIDING WITH THE
CADENCES OF THE
HARSH CHANTING
THAT ROSE IN PITCH
AS THE BATHING
PROGRESSED.

I HAVE A STORY TO TELL. Like all stories, it begins at the beginning; so much is self-evident. Why, then, state it?

I suppose it is because the beginning is becoming more confused in my mind, although I count myself fortunate that this is not due to any organic breakdown in my brain.

I am old. In this, too, I consider myself fortunate. I relish the fact that I was able to see the sun rise this morning, a habit for some years now. Life is full. However, there was a time when I had no care for waking, or the hours that passed until sleep claimed me. For consciousness had become a burden, filled as it was with streams of memories and a sick horror that would not succumb to the drugs they made me swallow to render me docile.

I am told that this was necessary, for I would rave and throw myself at walls and whoever tended me. But while the drugs made my body flaccid, the weight of thought and fear dragged at me; and though those awful seizures were controlled so that I did not cause myself or others harm, my mind was never still and I knew no peace.

However, I said that I had a story to tell, and before I waste this precious hour relating events consequent to that story I must organise my thoughts. Writing these thoughts with the familiar weight of my pen and the blank stare of the pad before me helps to set the memories in order, for I hope to answer the questions that have

been put to me countless times over the years. I have never recorded my story in any form until now. Whether I will allow this memoir to be read by any other, I have not yet decided. This, then, is chiefly for me. Perhaps I will add this chapter to my biography, though I doubt my publisher will consider it sufficiently credible. “You must think of your public,” she will say. “Have a care for your reputation, girl.”

But to work. I can postpone this no longer.



I was born in a part of England unsurpassed for its beauty. The gentle hills that comprised the shallow valley of my birthplace were clothed in forests that had never known the rape of axes. No commercial forestry there, no soft wood pines, but Oak, Yews, Ash; Hazel and Elm, Rowan and Chestnut, trees that had been sheltering and sustaining life from a time before any had thought to exploit the land and force it to yield crops. For thousands of years the valley was untouched, even surviving the ravages of the industrial revolution. No one knows how it came to be that such a rich harvest of wood escaped the charcoal ovens. Although the forests no longer thrive, I doubt that their passing will be noted. Nor should any think that this is any cause for regret.

It is said that Druids once worshipped there. I hear that there are plans to clear the fallen, putrefying timber. Perhaps they will dig there, as a colleague of mine at the university has often threatened to do. A part of me would discourage him from this, and yet a stronger curiosity suggests, in my darker moments, that it would be fascinating to see what such archaeology would yield. But no; what is buried there should remain so. It disturbs me to imagine what might be not so much unearthed as . . . woken.

Of this much I am certain: it is no longer a place in which people should live, though I do not think it should remain a place set apart. Undisturbed, secret places have a tendency to harbour a kind of sourness.

There was a village in that vale, known to few and unmarked on the maps of the time. Satellites (now, there’s a wonder!) have now placed the val-

ley in a specific grid reference. But I am talking about an age, some eighty years ago, when there were still whole communities that had been in-breeding for generations, and these likely to remain so until the roads opened them to new blood. The world invaded, dragging these villages along, and life moved on. Things are different now and, as I have already suggested, on the map that lays upon my desk it is clearly marked. Sometimes . . . sometimes, I would prefer that it was not.

I may have been born in that village—or at least, in the same vale that that community occupied—but I cannot be sure. I do not recall my mother and my formative years, from infancy to adolescence, were spent in one room, tucked away in windowless squalor in a subterranean cell that was a womb for me. I cannot tell how clearly I remember the loneliness of those years. I had no toys to occupy my time.

My earliest memory of that period involves only endless tuition in the verse that I learned throughout my childhood; scraps of it, mangled over decades, sometimes filter into my conscious mind as I wake, though they never lodge there long enough to allow me to render the words in ink. I suspect that they were never meant to be recorded thus; no nursery rhymes, these, but quatrains of obscene poetry. The harsh, guttural phonetics of those verses I have since seen, roughly approximated in the blackest of rituals described in glyphs carved upon obsidian steles. The race that had created them has passed from memory and the translations, only partial, are best kept where they are—locked away.

But again I am jumping ahead of myself; I knew not what I said, but to me they were precious, those few words that I was taught to speak, although they were never meant for normal conversation, or to express my wants or needs.

My meals were brought to me in silence. I ate them, bland and tasteless as they were, at the single table in my cell. I cannot remember ever tasting meat, then; I still have no stomach for it. Those solitary repasts were the only occasions when I was visited by any other living soul, except for the instructor, who was responsible for my outré tuition; and They wore hoods that con-

cealed their faces.

I spent most my time in that cell playing with the candles that lit my world with spitting, guttering flame. Those candles exuded an aroma that I can only liken to meat left too long to roast, but they were my playthings and eventually—I did not know it then—my salvation.

With great care I learned to sculpt scraps from those bars of fatty tallow, holding them over the flame of a single candle and moulding them into forms that pleased me. But such shapes as I created were wholly incongruous, bearing no resemblance to any object or being in the world, but always I laboured to produce something tangible as proof that my dreams, at least, were real. These artefacts I secreted beneath my bed, wary that my infrequent visitors would discover them.

I never ailed as a child; no sickness ever assailed me. It is surprising, in retrospect; there was dampness that oozed from the walls in slime trails. Strange fungi cast phosphorescent light in the shadowed corners at one wall, but only at certain times, when the temperature dropped, and my tutor would bring extra blankets. It was the only time that any kindness was offered. I suppose that this would have been winter, but I had no concept of seasons during my childhood, or of the passing of time—of day or week or year. Only that candles were lit and burned to a stump. They were the marks that indicated that there was such a thing as past and present. New candles were lit. A certain number would have to burn, I knew, before meals were brought. I never knew a moments' fever, save for the times when I woke, drenched with sweat and trembling from some rigor induced by those awful dreams.

For clothing I wore a thick robe and rough slippers of some soft material, which I think must have been wool—raw wool, since I cannot remember colour in my dungeon at all.

All was white, an absence of colour and yet all colours. Perhaps there was a symbolism in this, or simply that my captors had no thought as to the needs of a child. The walls were whitewashed regularly, and the dark stains of winter would be covered; the small, stunted fungi were scraped off and removed. The furniture was painted in like manner, the sheets also white, the mattress a sim-

ple wool—stuffed pallet.

So it was that even a single candle flame cast sufficient light to live by, reflected from those walls. I did not want for light to sculpt my wax. I even taught myself to cast shapes upon the blank screen of the wall, and found that I could produce entertaining forms, which I caused to move and cavort. I don't know if anyone ever heard my childish giggles; I suppose not, for I am sure that, if any had, my recreation would have been curtailed somehow. In any case, the game soon lost its novelty and my efforts at sculpture became my only pastime.

For how many years I lived—existed—in this state is uncertain to me, even now, or what portion of my seventy years. I say seventy, but this is because I bear such signs that befit a woman of those years. I remember my first bleeding, inducing such horror in me that I lay abed convinced that my body would shrivel away with my fluids until there was nothing left but a dried out carcass. I knew that there was such a thing as death, even in that sunless world, because I would catch insects (no matter how They tried, They could not prevent these small visitors from the upper world finding a way in). I would study them, pulling off appendages so like and yet unlike the things in my dreams. They would stop wriggling and, tossed aside, would shrivel and dry out and eventually be swept out.

When the blood was discovered, I recall that there was much excitement on the part of the robed attendant who changed my bedding and assisted me in my infrequent bathing. Another was summoned, and the two conversed at length. They did not seem to be as anxious as I was at the appearance of so much blood, but I was left in no doubt that this was an Event, and one that made me feel strangely special.

And so it seems to me that that bleeding was the beginning of the horror and the beginning of the end. I entered a phase marked by more frequent visits by my instructor. Sometimes many candles would burn before my tasteless meals were brought to me. I would wake from dreadful sleep, afraid to close my eyes again lest those monstrous things haunting my slumber would visit me again.

Yet it was not always so. I would sometimes be roused from sleep with drowsy warmth and an ache, at once so sweet and so mysterious, between my legs. Lying on my pallet one time, with no candle to light the cell, so that I knew They would not be close by, I experimented with one of the candles. I would introduce one end to the space within the faint, downy hair in that curious area between my thighs, and the sensation was so exquisite that I was often anxious to feel the length of it, but always there would be the same, soft obstruction that hurt if I pressed too ardently. Many times I would find some kind of release from that delicious ache, but it was not long before I was discovered.

I woke on one occasion, the cell in darkness, and feeling that familiar ache I reached for that shaft of wax that was my only comfort. As I experimented with it, twisting and pushing gently, a metallic scrape from the other side of the door made me jump. I was not ashamed of what I did, yet I knew that this one comfort would be denied me if it should be disclosed. But I was so close to that final, sweet release that I left the candle where it was, and while I gently played with one hand I laid the other atop the sheets. One of Them entered the room, crossing to the table to light another candle. Finding that the candle was not in its place, the hooded figure turned slowly toward me.

By such light as was cast from the open door, left slightly ajar, the blush of my cheeks was enough to betray me. Before I could attain my release, the sheets were thrown back and I was appalled when the candle I held was ripped from my grasp. There was shouting, and I knew this signalled displeasure. Yet there was no violence; there was never any violence inflicted upon me. But I was left without light for many meals to come. Past and present became as one, save for those infrequent bowls of nourishment.

I performed such physical exercises as had been taught me, in darkness. The cold floor made the soles of my feet ache, the stillness of my little world oppressive without that one flickering light for companionship. When these exercises were done, exhausted I would fall into my bed.

After one such set of exercises I heard the harsh

scrape behind the door, and for the first time in my life more than one of Them entered my world at one time. How many, I cannot say; I had no means, in my limited education, by which to count. Only that there were sufficient to hold me down on the bed while fingers probed me. Gentle, those grasping hands, but I could no more wrestle free from them than I could have beat down that single door. The probing did not hurt and I wondered at the new, foreign feelings that stirred within me. I could not remember any of Them having laid hands upon me before. It was a puzzling experience, at the same time alarming, comforting and exciting, but repulsive to me all the same, for my previous starvation of contact with other flesh had not prepared me.

There was no shouting. They spoke in not-quite-whispers; controlled tones which, one might suspect, had connotations of relief. Despite my ignorance of any language other than those undeciphered verses I had already learned, the sounds I heard uttered in that single moment were significant for me. So simple those words; I remember them for that reason, more by the simple mechanism that allows us to learn and recall a tune than by recognition of words or their significance. The one who probed between my legs stopped, withdrew cold fingers and nodded to the Others.

“It is time.”

Those alien sounds I recited repeatedly in my mind and, haltingly, aloud; it became a personal mantra in my loneliness, although I never repeated them in the presence of one of Them, for fear that they would somehow take even that small comfort from me.

The next time one of Them came to me, I was amazed that the robe worn was different. It bore strange markings upon a sheer, almost transparent material that whispered when it brushed against the floor. The figure before me seemed taller, more powerful in stature and presence than I had encountered hitherto. I was gently undressed and after many strange phrases were spoken—akin to the language I had been versed in—the robed one left me. I had no clothing, and I lay in bed swathed in sheets against the cold. My Visitor had taken my only clothing, but had left a candle—huge, too big to put to any use other

than as a source of light.

The light, I recall, was curious; not the cold light I was accustomed to, but of a tone and hue I could not describe, being starved of any colour save that of my own bodily waste, or my menstrual blood. I cannot, even now, describe that illumination as it seemed to me then. It frightened and delighted me, my senses reeled and I began to feel disorientated; I could no longer tell the difference between waking and sleeping, so that it was all the same to me. The things that haunted my dreams were sometimes present for many candles of time.

To regain some control of my senses, I began to chip at the candle. I stood, shivering with only a sheet around me, making a ball of wax that grew as the flame melted more of it, long streams running over and down the cooler sides. These I pressed away, folding the strands and adding these to my ball until I had enough for modelling. I became so absorbed in this activity that sometimes I was almost too late to return to my bed before the door opened. There were new, strange catechisms to learn—none of which held meaning for me—but always I remembered my own little mantra. It is time. It is time.

During my modelling activities I remember holding the wax above the flame, softening it because it had grown hard while I lay in my bed. I resolved to shape the lump into something much more practical, something that I could use to satiate the ache that came and went, leaving the area between my legs moist. While in this state of excitement I caught the base of the candle with the sheet I held around me. It toppled, and hot wax sprayed my chest and hands. Suddenly a new sensation—pain, burning—and, staggered by it, I tripped over the dangling sheet and fell. I landed hard on my back, and I caught my head on the corner of the bed. I held my hand against the flare of pain in my skull and I felt alarm when my hands came away wet. My palms glistened darkly in that weird light, and I studied them even as the light sputtered and went out.

The candle had rolled onto its side, close to the edge of the table. I crawled to the faint ember of light in the wick and blew on it, watching the dull light flare up briefly before, to my horror, it

died completely. I could feel wax, newly dripped, upon the floor. I waited for it to cool then peeled it away from the smooth surface, keeping all the pieces and pressing them into my ball of wax. I was fearful lest any of Them should discover the candle had been disturbed. By touch alone I cleaned all traces from the floor and table, set the candle back in its holder and returned to my bed. When one of Them came, bearing a small bowl of tasteless mush, the room was in darkness but with the candle mostly unburned. The figure paused before setting the bowl down, then glanced from the candle to me, cocked its head slightly to one side, but without further demonstration re-lit the candle. Left once again to my solitary breakfast, I squeezed the wax in one hand to keep it warm and pliable.

I turned the pillowcase inside out to hide the stain of blood, but saw that it came through to the other side. I turned the pillow over so that no sign of my blood would show. I licked the sticky mess of clots from my hands then peeled wax from my chest and hands. I thought I had evaded their suspicion and, for a short while, I did.

A few meals and candles later I was shocked to my soul to be confronted, again, by an uncounted number of Them. I did not know how many there were, or that so many could exist. My universe had consisted of few visitors and was consequently peopled by that small number. I could never have dreamed that so many lived. And there were more, in the space outside the door.

Outside the door . . . for the first time I had an impression of space beyond my small world and contemplating this made my head spin, my stomach to churn.

I was seized by hands, a fold of fabric tied over my eyes. Fear caused me to lose control of my water and it splashed to the floor, my legs warm and wet, mingling with more of that strange bleeding between my legs. I think I whimpered a little. No sound from Them, though; I was pushed, guided, my steps unsure but I knew that I had left my small world behind, that my world had changed irrevocably. I longed for my bed and the security of my little cell but I was pushed inexorably onward. I was lifted bodily, my feet leaving the ground; occasionally my toes would connect

with a hard edge but the sense of rising upward continued. The journey and terror were one, and I felt that I would never know quiet in my soul, my mind, ever again.

At last, the journey ended. My hands were tied behind me and before I could decide whether to be curious or terrified concerning my new circumstances I was lifted once again, to be lowered and immersed into a volume of warm water. It was scented with a sharp, spicy smell, not unpleasant but heady and strong so that I could almost taste it.

A strange chanting began and I heard the scuffling of bare feet against some different sort of floor, which creaked and popped with each step. Hands bathed me, stroking me, gliding with the cadences of the harsh chanting that rose in pitch as the bathing progressed.

Finally, set upon the floor, something soft and deep beneath my feet; towels were draped around me, rubbed over my body, and a robe of some strange fabric—like a draught of air upon my skin, so thin and sheer was its weave—was drawn over my head. My hands were untied, guided through the sleeves, and then loosely bound once again—more to prevent any unnecessary movement, I thought, than to keep me totally immobile.

As I stood, still blind folded, in my new robe—scented with something that excited and provoked my senses—certain words were spoken to me which I had learned demanded appropriate responses. I performed my part with ease; the sounds that would otherwise confound a civilised tongue dripped easily from mine. I had an impression of space, that this new world was so much bigger than the former, but that it still had boundaries. This other world, then, was not as fearful as I had imagined. I began to relax, to feel more secure amongst this alien congregation. I surrendered my senses totally to the role for which I had been prepared, that I was now enacting, this part in the world for which it seemed I had been born.

I repeated the verses as expected and I felt a growing vibration, something apart yet feeding upon the distorted song whirled about me. I was the centre of some ethereal vortex that took on an almost tangible substance. I was lifted; there was

motion forward and upward, my body tilted so that I lay upon a bed of arms that descended gently onto some slab. It was cold, cutting through the sheer fabric of my robe.

The chanting stopped suddenly; I thought for a moment that I had lost my hearing but then, after a brief pause, one of Them began to intone more phrases and sounds in the same language, a strident, demanding voice that would tolerate no refusal.

There were separate chants now—initiated by the first voice, followed by a response from the Others. I lay, shivering uncontrollably, afraid once more. My world expanded beyond all boundaries. I sensed space fragmenting around me, in my mind, until I felt myself floating in a void, as if I had penetrated a veil, leaving the world far behind. Beyond the veil were, I sensed, those monsters with whom I had kept company in my dreams but I had no longer the courage to hope that there would be any waking from this final nightmare.

Something cold and sharp sliced through my robe between my small breasts. The material parted. I raised my head to see what was to follow but my eyes were still covered. A hand—firm, insistent—pushed my head down, but I resisted. Stronger now, the hand pressed again and my head bumped against the slab beneath me. I could feel the delicate, fresh scab on my scalp dislodge; blood began to flow.

The chanting began once more. The cold slab grew sticky beneath my neck and shoulders, seeping through the robe, pooling in the hollows in my back.

I felt a hand laid upon my feet and it travelled upward along my legs, causing bumps of flesh to rise wherever it stopped. The voice above me paused and then continued, broken by single words, as if to name those parts of my body where his hand came to rest—my pubic mound, my belly, my chest, breasts, and so to my head. Then, as the voice began a new chant, there was a gasp.

There was a disturbance in the vortex about me: spinning wildly, no longer controlled. My body seemed to spin with it and now, in place of the urgent, confident voices carrying the chant, small cries and shouts began to reach me.

The spinning stopped. A wind sprang from the vortex and a change in the vibrations suddenly ended with a roar and crash. Something heavy had dropped from some unguessable height. The world shuddered with it; the sound of splintering, something breaking.

There was some Other present amongst us.

And then the screaming began.

I lay upon the slab, not daring to move, unable in fact to twitch even a finger. The screaming gave way to wet, wrenching sounds and pitiful whimpering; there were other, more hideous splintering sounds. The voice of the one above me began to chant again—horrible, choked sounds they were—and a blade hit my chest. I screamed—the blow was clumsy, not final as it was meant to be. It cut deeply but my heart continued to beat. The instrument had stuck in a rib and trembling hands tried to retrieve it but slipped—perhaps on blood.

A scream choked in my throat as another hand touched my body and my spirit retreated from it. Although I had no concept of good or evil, I recoiled from that Touch; I still bear the scars, so I know that it was no dream-like wraith, just as I know that it bore no fingers. It possessed wriggling appendages that circled and straightened and gripped, and they closed over the thing stuck in my chest. With a single tug it was wrenched from me. As pain finally overwhelmed me I heard the dying scream of someone trying to flee and I knew that the thing in my chest had found another home, a strike through flesh, muscle and bone to another's heart.

I felt a deeper sleep than I had ever known close over me, but as I slipped easily and gratefully into it, leaving the pain behind, I heard once again words in that gross tongue shrieking and warbling through the phlegm of some monstrous throat. I knew then that this was the way in which Those to whom the language truly belonged would speak it. It sprang from the tongue of a native, from whatever dimension it had emerged.



To my re-awakening from that deep, healing sleep, mercifully dreamless, I can only allude. It

was the birth of a sentient creature into a world for which it was ill prepared. The newborn infant can have no horror of the cosmos into which it is thrust blindly, mewling and bloody; my senses had already been attuned to another, wholly different world and the confrontation with this new one snapped what sanity I had.

At first, I thought that I was back in my cell. Then the harsh smells assailed me (I know now that it was the sterile stink of a hospital). When I opened my eyes, a hideous visage loomed over me, leering at me with two glistening orbs, a snout or protuberance from which hair sprang, and a wet mouth ringed with teeth. I screamed and saw more of the monsters piling into a room which was not my own and there was horrible, hurtful bright light from many candles. I lost consciousness again.

The rest, I am told, was a grim comedy of which I have little memory. New things were introduced gradually and, finally, a mirror. I wept for days when I saw that I, too, was as ugly as the others. I could not understand why they laughed.

As for my education in this new world, it was painful and slow. I was censured when I regurgitated the gibberish I had already learned. It was a long time before I had the mastery of a new grammar and vocabulary with which to describe my life before I was found, naked and bleeding, in a wooded valley one Spring morning just a day after the Solstice. I have since thought of it as my real birthday.

I have studied many books since I first entered this new world, and the beauty therein has still the power to make me weep. I think I will always see the world as an infant and it troubles me that my peers long ago ceased to be seized by the wonder of it.

And yet, for all its beauties, I am aware of the darkness behind the veil. For what separates us from that Mystery is merely the contraction of muscle, the beat of a pump which courses life through our veins. It is, indeed, a thin veil. A missed heartbeat brings us nearer to it. I once glimpsed what lies there, and I strive to fight it wherever it intrudes upon the cosmos of order. I have discovered books kept under lock and key, as well they should be, in universities and private

collections, both in England and America—where I now live—but also as far as Egypt, India and China. Wherever I find such books and documents pertaining to those Arts which make it possible for the veil to be breached, I do not rest until these works are purchased and delivered into the vaults of my university in Arkham. I sometimes question the wisdom of this. Perhaps they would be better dispersed among the universities and museums of the world. I sometimes fancy, when I am studying documents in the vaults, that I hear the chattering of those leather bound pages as they whisper to each other. Or perhaps it is not fancy at all. For all of these books, if I have not already made my point plain, bear testimony to a horror that waits and sleeps and yet does not sleep, and to which I was very nearly an unblemished sacrifice.

Before I end this biography I must also relate something concerning that valley community from which I was borne, for the village no longer exists. On the day of my rescue, the vale was devoid of any other human life. The rest, it seems, were consumed in a fire that gutted and utterly razed what was once a Manor house. It appears that I somehow stumbled out of the holocaust, unscathed but for my knife wound. I was found before the elements finished whatever business they had failed to complete; a thunderstorm, with many ground strikes, had destroyed all traces of habitation. I must have been in some stupor, unaware of my wanderings, for I have no recall of it.

I never returned to the area to verify any of this, for the vale—thousands of acres of it—burned up in the ugliest forest fires ever recorded on English soil. The area remains blackened and barren to this day. No buildings survived; their archaic structure were ready fuel for the flames as they swept across the valley. No distinguishable organic remains, human or otherwise, were ever recovered.

It is no longer fashionable to express such beliefs, I know, but I am convinced of the Hand of another, wholly righteous being in this. It would have been unimaginable for anyone to have re-inhabited that village, or to have rebuilt upon that ravaged land. For my part I have made it my

personal business to ensure that it remains so. I return to England as often as lecturing duties at the Miskatonic university allow but my studies are taxing and dark. Sometimes I forget the beauty around me and I feel my reason begin to crumble when I contemplate what might, one day, befall humankind.

Sometimes I hear another voice in my dreams. It is the voice of a young girl, talking to herself to relieve her loneliness:

It is time. It is time.

May it never be so.



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